



Sharing Power in Practice

The Story of McKnight Artist Fellowships Community Values

BY ARLETA LITTLE

New in 2021, the McKnight Artist Fellowships program is implementing a statement of shared community values across its 14 partner organizations. This statement articulates a collective commitment to creating and supporting an artistic community in which all individuals are treated with respect and dignity, and to creating and maintaining relationships that are free of harm, prejudice, and harassment.

This shared commitment comes at a time when communities within Minnesota and across the country are wrestling with how best to approach issues of community safety and are seeking alternatives to an overreliance on institutional policing. Notably, discussions of equity within philanthropy often focus exclusively on the distribution of resources, which is a vital wing of the bird. What follows is a story about the other wing—the sharing of power—and how active engagement and a willingness to learn with our partners resulted in better decision making, policy development, and practices for McKnight and our artist fellowships community.

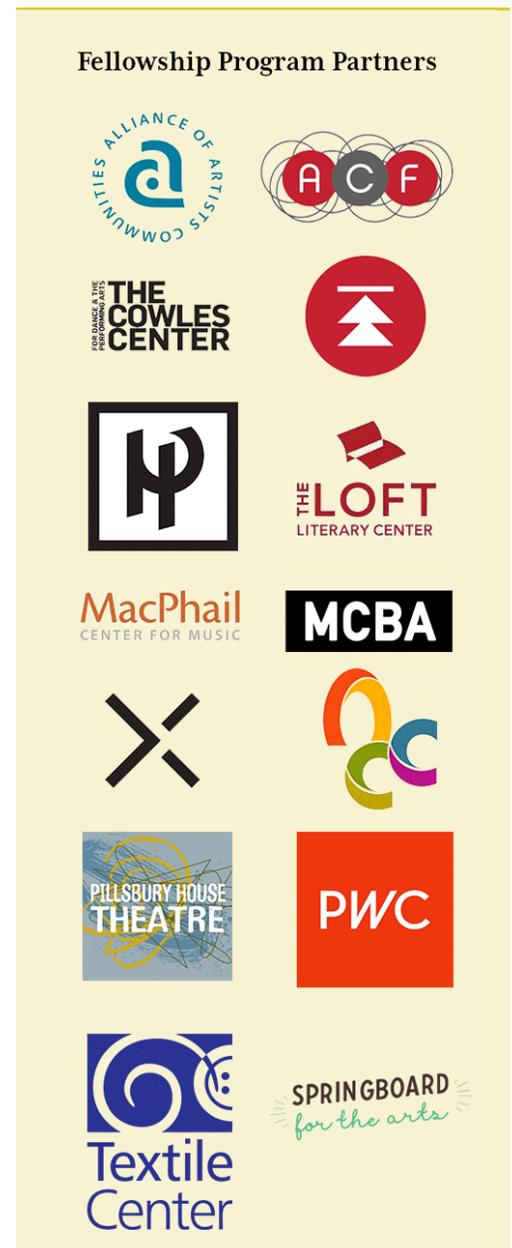
The McKnight Artist Fellowships Program & Partners

In 1982, the McKnight Foundation established the [McKnight Artist Fellowships](#) to provide financial resources and development opportunities to midcareer artists living and working in Minnesota. Over time, the program has adapted and grown as Minnesota’s arts ecosystem has diversified and matured. Currently, the program provides 46 annual fellowship awards of \$25,000 in 14 different artist-disciplines. McKnight collaborates with 14 artist service organizations in administering the fellowships and supporting the experience of fellows.

For the past seven years, I have served as McKnight’s director of artist fellowships. My responsibilities include coordinating the fellowships program and nurturing the fellowships community. Five times each year, McKnight and the fellowships program partners gather to share learning, problem solve, and offer mutual support. In recent years, this coalition has also convened task forces and working groups to do collective planning, update the program’s eligibility requirements, and develop greater budgetary alignment across the administrative sites.

How to Address Conduct Issues?

The arts are a microcosm of broader societal issues. Since the inception of the McKnight Artist Fellowships program, when an artist or program participant has had or been accused of conduct issues, our partners have approached McKnight on a case-by-case basis. We had previously forged solutions in more of a piecemeal fashion in the absence of a specific policy directive from McKnight or an established, consistent practice among our fellowships partners. Managing these conduct issues has been complicated by the fact that applicants, fellows, and other program participants are not employees of McKnight or of our program partners, and are not specifically subject to employee harassment policies or other relevant organizational policies. However, recent mass participation in protests (resulting in arrests and criminal charges), allegations and stories of sexual abuse, and ongoing movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too have elevated the need for evolving clear guidance to equip McKnight and our fellowships partners to respond with intention and consistency. Toward this end, I committed to convening a task force with fellowships partners who had responded to conduct-related issues to explore a prospective policy response and recommend effective practices for use across fellowship sites.



McKnight's Initial Recommendations

Within McKnight, I also pursued the matter with the director of the arts program and select members of McKnight's senior leadership team, including the vice president of finance & operations and the vice president of programs. The vice president of finance & operations took the lead in fashioning recommendations in consultation with legal counsel that specifically addressed McKnight's concerns regarding conduct issues that could reasonably be expected to reflect adversely on McKnight or our partnering organizations. McKnight's initial recommendations were as follows:

- ▶ Articulate expectations of conduct and behavior during the fellowship experience
- ▶ Articulate a commitment to the "character and fitness" of selected fellows
- ▶ Ask applicants to disclose felony convictions (within the past seven years)
- ▶ Ask applicants to disclose ongoing legal actions related to misconduct
- ▶ Ask fellows to disclose/notify about potentially "damaging" conduct, arrests, or charges of criminal offense
- ▶ Articulate the consequences of a failure to disclose—e.g., loss of fellowship; return of funds
- ▶ Conduct background checks on fellows (prior to issuing award).

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In a different time, involving different people or a different organization, the recommendations from the foundation's leadership in consultation with the organization's lawyers and centering foundation's compliance and liability interests might have been the end of the conversation. These recommendations would have translated to directives to be unilaterally delivered to grantee partners for implementation. That's not what happened this time. Instead, recognizing the importance of engaging those who would have to live most directly with the policy, McKnight opted for dialogue, openness to experimentation, and inclusivity.

Convening a Conduct Task Force

In the fall of 2020, a special task force involving fellowship partners, past artist fellows, the director of artist fellowships, and other members of McKnight's arts team convened to discuss how to address issues of conduct when they surface in the McKnight Artist Fellowships program, and to consider and respond to the Foundation's initial recommendations. The participants included fellowships program partners and past fellows from the Loft, FilmNorth, Pillsbury House Theatre, Highpoint Center for Printmaking, and the Cowles Center.

From the start, the Conduct Task Force was interested in recognizing the humanity of all involved and identifying an approach that was fair, just, and humane. We wanted to create an environment within the fellowships program in which artists could both thrive and be protected, without fostering a culture that was punitive or policing. The task force began its work by reviewing examples of existing policies, including an anti-harassment policy for McKnight employees and codes of conduct in use at partnering organizations. McKnight's initial recommendations spotlighted the specific need to address three areas of concern: (1) articulating expectations for behavior and conduct; (2) defining an approach to disclosures and notifications; and (3) establishing a consensus on background checks.

The Conduct Task Force wrestled with challenges to defining when and where expectations of behavior would be applied since fellows and other participating artists are independent actors. Connection with the McKnight Artist Fellowships served as an organizing principle in defining the scope of applicability and the parameters of the community. The group had a robust dialogue regarding felonies and scenarios involving criminal charges and arrests. With this, we had a shared concern about an overreliance on legalistic solutions and the risk of creating a systemic response that could disproportionately deter, exclude, or impact artists from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. We were wary of setting an unwelcoming or punitive tone that would contradict the goal of a celebratory and supportive fellowships experience. We also had a specific interest in lifting up possibilities for reconciliation and restorative justice. In addition, there was a consensus that background checks similarly ran counter to the spirit of the fellowship awards. There was no appetite for adding background checks as an administrative or vetting procedure.

Ultimately, the Conduct Task Force committed to articulating the kind of community that we wanted to create and inhabit rather than attempting to adjudicate the behaviors that we did not want. We wanted to create conditions of mutual accountability for community members and to identify clear administrative actions in response to emergent or presenting issues. We sought to structure opportunities for applicants, fellows, and other participants to disclose conduct-related issues at various points of intersection within the fellowships experience. Lastly, we wanted to root all of this in an understanding of and commitment to shared values.

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Conduct Task Force Recommendations

The Conduct Task Force made the following recommendations for review by McKnight and for sharing with the full body of fellowship partners:

- ▶ Create a statement of community values
- ▶ Add this statement to fellowship applications, fellow agreements, and program-related contracts starting in January 2021
- ▶ Include the statement as a general reference document for use at information sessions, panelist orientations, etc.
- ▶ Insert practice steps in the identification and notification of fellows
 - Identify alternates (per discipline, per cohort)
 - Soon after notification and prior to the public announcement of fellows, have an “opportunity for disclosure” conversation with the selected fellows (where they can review and agree to the community values statement)
- ▶ Add incident notification clauses to partner grant agreements
- ▶ Have McKnight share the statement and process learnings with the field; program partners will amplify and share

Shared Ownership, Shared Success

McKnight's arts and senior leadership and the entire body of the artist fellowships partners fully supported the recommendations of the Conduct Task Force and the statement of McKnight Artist Fellowships Community Values. We celebrate this process for its diligence and inclusivity. We recognize success as our work together creates an experience of collective agency and ownership rooted in shared problem solving, shared learning, and shared power.



McKnight Artist Fellowships Community Values Statement

Welcome to the McKnight Artist Fellowships community! The McKnight Foundation and the administering partners for the McKnight Artist Fellowships are committed to creating and supporting an artistic community in which all individuals are treated with respect and dignity. The community of the McKnight Artist Fellowships includes people who engage with the fellowships program whether as applicants, fellows, panelists, contractors, collaborators, fellowships administrators, or as staff of the McKnight Foundation and partnering organizations.

As a community, we commit to creating and maintaining relationships that are free of harm, prejudice, and harassment. Community members agree to communicate directly and transparently regarding issues of conduct that could negatively impact the well-being of participating members and organizations.

In the case of an accusation, a legal action, or a conviction, the McKnight Foundation and its artist fellowships program partners may gather and assess relevant information. If deemed necessary, the McKnight Foundation and its artist fellowships program partners may take administrative action up to and including the recommendation of participation in reconciliation or restorative justice processes; the disqualification of an application; the termination of a contract; and the recall and/or termination of a fellowship.

This community will be what we make it. Our aim is to collectively create an experience in which all artists and members of the McKnight Artist Fellowships community thrive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arleta Little joined the McKnight Foundation in 2013 and serves as a program officer in the Arts program and as director of the McKnight Artist Fellowships Program. In her tenure, Little has built community with McKnight's fellowships program partners and defined a research-based rationale for increasing the program's fellowship support for working artists.

ABOUT THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, advances a more just, creative, and abundant future where people and planet thrive. Established in 1953, the McKnight Foundation is deeply committed to advancing climate solutions in the Midwest; building an equitable and inclusive Minnesota; and supporting the arts in Minnesota, neuroscience, and international crop research.

ABOUT THE McKNIGHT ARTIST FELLOWSHIPS

Founded on the belief that Minnesota thrives when its artists thrive, the McKnight Foundation's arts program is one of the oldest and largest of its kind in the country. Support for individual working Minnesota artists has been a cornerstone of the program since it began in 1982. The [McKnight Artist Fellowships Program](#) provides annual, unrestricted cash awards to outstanding mid-career Minnesota artists in 14 different creative disciplines. Program partner organizations administer the fellowships and structure them to respond to the unique challenges of different disciplines. Currently the foundation contributes about \$2.8 million per year to its statewide fellowships. For more information, visit mcknight.org/artistfellowships.