

McKnight Strategic Framework: 2012-2014

INTRODUCTION

The McKnight Foundation is a 4th-generation family foundation that channels support through multiple program areas. Our programs reflect decades, and generations, of diverse interests and investments.

McKnight’s board and staff are guided by our mission and values. We develop and adjust strategies and approaches based on continuous learning, new research and data, and emergent knowledge. Program interests include regional economic and community development, Minnesota’s arts and artists, early literacy, youth development, Midwest climate and energy, Mississippi River water quality, neuroscience and international crop research, and community-building in Southeast Asia.

Founded 60 years ago and headquartered in Minnesota, about 65% of our grantmaking in 2012 went to support efforts in our home state. Our comprehensive approach includes grantmaking, collaboration across issues and sectors, research, program-related investing, and policy reform. At home and around the world, quality relationships and deep understanding of place inform how we learn and adapt to changing circumstances.

In 2011, the Foundation’s board and staff engaged in an external scan to consider major trends and patterns in our external context and to develop a shared sense of what these mean for our work. We considered a set of three questions — *What?*, *So What?*, and *Now What?* — a useful discussion model to explore and reflect upon complex issues. These seemingly simple questions provided a framework for probing discussions and direction setting:

- *What? = What is the real context today for McKnight, our grantees, and the world we live in?*
- *So What? = What are the implications of current trends and patterns for our work? Where are the levers of change?*
- *Now What? = Pairing our resources with what we’ve learned, what should we do next?*

Background

We looked at lots of data and documents to develop this strategic framework, and would like to cite with special appreciation two documents that deeply informed our discussions:



A National Strategic Narrative by Captain Wayne Porter and Colonel Mark Mykleby. We are grateful to Col. Mykleby for sharing insights and examples of other moments in our national history where a compelling narrative broke through seemingly intractable division, reminding us what is at stake if we do not shift our narrative “from containment to sustainment.”



What’s Next for Philanthropy: Acting Bigger and Adapting Better in a Networked World from The Monitor Institute. This piece rang true to so much of what we at McKnight have learned and apply in our own work, including our embrace of creative tensions over false dichotomies — considering the value of “both/and,” rather than “either/or.”



1. WHAT?: THE EXTERNAL SCAN

We believe our impact is greatest when we have a deep understanding of the context in which we operate, and the challenges and opportunities faced by our grantees and partners.

Some current megatrends and patterns we believe are highly relevant for our mission and goals include:

- **Critical variables such as shifting economies, local and global politics, and climate change** are multiple, and many are unpredictable. Systems are massively entangled, and many are dysfunctional and unsustainable.
- **Demographics are shifting** locally and globally. Racial and economic disparities in Minnesota are stark and persistent.
- **New organizational structures for social purpose are emerging.** Social media is fueling new patterns for connectivity and philanthropy.
- **Public discourse is at a virtual standstill** in the U.S. The nation is unable to tackle key decisions with long-term impacts due to political gridlock.
- **In the ongoing global financial crisis,** volatility is the new normal.
- **Climate change is real.** Our opportunity to forestall catastrophic impacts declines with each day of inaction. The erosion of trust in scientific evidence on this issue and others negatively impacts public policy.
- **Sustainability of independent media is in question,** which has implications for a high-functioning democratic system.
- **Pressure is growing on natural and non-renewable resources,** including critical habitats and biodiversity hotspots.
- **Technology creates new opportunities** to aggregate massive amounts of data, and communicate across boundaries in real time.
- Although challenges are huge, **crucial resources such as information, wisdom, and empathy are abundant.**

2. SO WHAT?: IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK

In response to this ever-changing landscape, McKnight's board reaffirmed our mission and made modest revisions in our core values, values which inform every decision and action taken by board and staff on a daily basis.

Our Mission

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations.

Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, we use our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve.

Our Values

Accountability — We use the Foundation's resources in a transparent manner to strengthen and sustain individuals, communities, and the environment. We endeavor to make high-quality decisions based upon a mix of analysis, wisdom, experience, and judgment.

Innovation — We collaborate with others to test and develop new ideas and pathways to address complex problems.

Integrity — We strive to do the right thing. We are honest and forthright, and people can trust what we say. We demand ethical conduct in our relationships and actions, and we expect the same from our partners.

Respect — We listen to diverse perspectives. We approach relationships with humility, openness, and honesty. We engage constructively with partners, colleagues, and the communities we serve.

Our Niche

We employ integrative approaches seeking to link people, place, and possibility.

We believe much of the power and impact of our work derives from the quality of our relationships with the people closest to the issues we address, and from our deep knowledge of the place or context in which we work — whether that place is next door or in another country.

We use a robust toolkit to discover, recognize, spur, and support ideas and approaches that provide tangible, short-term solutions while also influencing systems to be more adaptive, resilient, and responsive to changing conditions.

We have identified “adaptive leadership” as core to McKnight's relevance and effectiveness, given the trends and patterns identified previously. We recognize that our staff's deep knowledge in specific subject areas, combined with an inquisitive nature and comfort engaging across disciplines and sectors, yields a powerful combination for working within and across complex systems.

3. NOW WHAT?: LOOKING FORWARD

To exert credible influence in all aspects of the Foundation's work, we will use a varied set of strategies consistent with our values and organizational strengths. We will:

- Honor connection and interdependence, working with our partners to lead with confidence and humility.
- Remain flexible, because what we knew before may no longer be true or useful. As we learn with and from others, model adaptive action.
- Seek out and create opportunities to bring our vantage point as a regional and place-based funder into national networks, particularly on policy and systems-change. Contribute perspective, knowledge, and new ideas to our home state.
- Strengthen McKnight's influence by building out a simple, but useful knowledge management system, and intensify our use of social media and other platforms to share knowledge generated with our grantee network.
- Leverage converging interests and promote equitable, sustainable systems across issues and sectors to create multiple bottom-line benefits — e.g. economic, environmental, social.
- Scale our impact up and out through public policy support and strategic leveraging across issues and sectors.
- Deepen our direct impact and influence through appropriate, emerging, program-supportive approaches such as mission-related investing.

This strategic framework will inform our ongoing cycle of reflection and refinements of each strategy, and how we identify and pursue opportunities to deepen impact within and across our core program areas:

Arts: Minnesota thrives when its artists thrive. The McKnight Foundation supports working artists to create and contribute to vibrant communities.

Education & Learning: Within the cradle-to-career continuum, we focus on increasing the percentage of students reading at grade level by the end of third grade; and increasing access to high-quality learning beyond the classroom so that all Minnesota's youth thrive.

International: We work to provide greater access to nutritious food that is locally and sustainably produced, using research and sharing knowledge to strengthen the capacities of small-holder farmers, research institutions, and development organizations. We support balanced approaches to natural resource management and community resource rights.

McKnight Endowment Fund for Neuroscience: We work to bring science closer to the day when diseases of the brain and behavior can be accurately diagnosed, prevented, and treated.

Midwest Climate & Energy: We work to help the Midwest become an international model in addressing climate change by reducing heat-trapping emissions in all economic sectors.

Minnesota Initiative Foundations: We support six independent foundations representing defined state regions to make Greater Minnesota stronger and more prosperous.

Mississippi River: We use our resources to restore the water quality and resilience of the Mississippi River.

Region & Communities: We work to increase efficient and sustainable regional metropolitan development that creates livable communities and expands opportunities for all to thrive.

