



On the Road to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: The McKnight Experience

The McKnight Foundation is sharing our efforts in developing cultural competency and taking meaningful steps to embed diversity, equity and inclusion as core values. We share our story, and related materials, to document our own learning and first steps in our journey. We learned from many individuals and organizations and hope that others may learn from our story to support their own journey.

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McKnight Foundation Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Imagine a world where **every child** recognizes the sacredness of their **humanity**. And every family has enough to eat, and a place to call **home**, no matter the **color** of their skin or the ZIP code of their **birth**.

Imagine how much higher we could **soar** in our **arts** and **sciences** if we realized that **ingenuity** comes from all quarters, and we sought out **hidden assets**.

Imagine if everyone could enjoy the **bounty** of the land that has **sustained us** for generations, and we could come together to preserve our one and only **Earth**.

Guided by this vision, the McKnight Foundation is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values.

DIVERSITY: We appreciate and leverage our differences, and we involve and reflect the communities we serve.

EQUITY: We align our policies, practices, and resources so that people of all races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses have genuine opportunities to thrive.

INCLUSION: We create an environment in which everyone feels valued and respected.

This commitment is critical to deepening our relevance, credibility, and effectiveness, and it will strengthen our mission to improve the lives of present and future generations. The civic and economic vitality of our home state of Minnesota, known as Mni Sota Makoce to the Dakota, depends on inclusive and equitable opportunities for everyone.


We see many ways to realize this vision as a funder, convenor, thought leader, and as an employer, economic entity, and institutional investor.

In all we do, we seek to be conscious of and address the deeply entrenched practices, cultural norms, and decisionmaking structures that perpetuate inequities. Racial discrimination is a legacy of our nation's painful history, and institutional racism and unconscious bias persist. Equity means receiving what one needs to succeed, as we are not all born with the same opportunities.

We approach our work on diversity, equity, and inclusion with courage and optimism—knowing it requires a sustained commitment. When we make mistakes along the way, we will adapt and continue to learn.

This work is our shared responsibility—and our shared *opportunity*—because what is at stake is nothing less than our shared fate.





This article about McKnight's intercultural competency training is reprinted here with permission from the Minnesota Council on Foundations. It originally appeared in the Spring 2018 issue of *Giving Forum*.

The Difference That Makes A Difference

By Dennis Cass

In 1994, the MCF board approved its first Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Framework, which has led to changes across its strategies, governance and operations. The framework states that grantmaking is most effective when grantmakers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. MCF is passionate about addressing the many challenges that foundations face, including working toward the common goal of advancing a just and inclusive society. In 2018, the topic of DEI continues to get increased consideration in foundation board meetings and offices across the state and region. And as we all dive into the topic, we learn that the work required to move toward truly diverse and equitable communities is a long journey. We have no reason to hesitate given the barriers to becoming more inclusive grantmakers, and in the last year, many foundations have invested in taking bigger steps - and even leaps toward overcoming them. The following article profiles the process and some of the early outcomes of the McKnight Foundation's DEI journey.



Recognizing the Nuances of Diversity

While discussing trends in racial disparities in education and employment in Minnesota, board and staff members alike at the McKnight Foundation asked what more they could do to close such vexing disparities. While the private family foundation had a long legacy of championing and demonstrating equity in its grantmaking and community partnerships, the board realized it still had much more to do to fully understand the complex nuances of diversity, equity and inclusion. In other words, they didn't know what they still needed to know.

Kate Wolford, the McKnight Foundation's president, understood the significance of the board's request. "Given the dramatic demographic changes in our communities, the deep and persistent data around structural racism, and feedback from community partners, we saw how this quest could enhance the impact of our grantmaking," she says.

Wolford worked closely with Bernadette Christiansen, vice president of operations, to consider next steps. Christiansen researched how other foundations were incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion into their work in meaningful ways. McKnight chose a developmental approach and focused on cultural competency as a platform on which to build its diversity, equity, and inclusion framework.

McKnight decided to enlist the help of MCF, which had just begun offering consulting services to its members. McKnight engaged MCF to create and deliver a series of group and individual oppor-

tunities to understand and develop intercultural competency. MCF staff paired up with One Ummah Consulting, a local consulting group that specializes in intercultural development to lead the work with McKnight board and staff. Alfonso Wenker of MCF and Nehw Abdul-Wahid of One Ummah Consulting co-facilitated the start of a lifelong journey for the board and staff of McKnight.

In the first session, the facilitators introduced the group to the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), an instrument for understanding cultural competence and a tool used to measure people's capacity to recognize and navigate cultural differences with greater levels of complexity. This developmental approach focuses in part on developing an understanding of the difference between what's called objective and subjective culture.

"Objective culture is art, language, food," Wenker says. "Subjective culture is made up of all the unseen ways in which we are how we are, like whether or not you make eye contact with someone when you speak to them." Subjective culture is where the meanings behind eye contact lives.

Differences in objective culture are easy to spot. Subjective culture is harder to see. That's where the IDI comes in. McKnight board and staff members took the 50-question instrument online. Each board and staff member received their individual assessment, and a group profile reflecting the organization as a whole was also generated once all assessments were completed.



Facing the Difficult Truth

McKnight's profile reflected a Minimization orientation, and according to IDI trainers, 67% of people who take the IDI use a Minimization mindset - which is marked by an understanding of cultural difference while simultaneously overly relying on the assumed commonalities between groups. People with this profile may see difference in the abstract or on the surface, but may discount (minimize) how significantly cultural differences influence behaviors, policies, and practices.

"Minimization means that I'm listening to difference," adds Wenker. "But I'm hearing sameness. I beckon with one hand and I say, 'Come be different.' But with the other hand I give the stiff arm. Organizationally we say we want different perspectives, but then when we bring in people from diverse backgrounds, we onboard them for sameness."

Learning that their organizational profile was in minimization was a call to action for many McKnight staff members. "This is a group of people who are high performers. To learn that our group profile was in minimization - just like 67% of people - showed that in the area of intercultural competency, we had a lot of room for improvement," said Christiansen. "There was an immediate desire for a commitment from me that the group would re-take the assessment in 18 months. People wanted to see growth and development."

The IDI describes current capacity while also indicating what kind of learning is required to build greater capacity. McKnight staff spent 18 months working to develop those competencies, and their facilitators led the organization through a series of seven intensive all-staff workshops. In addition, McKnight made coaching available for individuals and teams.

Abdul-Wahid explains that the challenge with Minimization is that one of its key components is both a strength and a source of interference. "We need commonality to recognize each other's humanity," he says. "Recognizing similarities between cultures and having shared expectations is a strength. But Minimization leads to an over-dependence on commonality. Minimization wants an environment of comfort. Minimization is conflict averse. There's an inability to have honest, authentic discussions."

Once the group understood the relative strengths and weaknesses of the orientations on the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC, the theory upon which the IDI is based), it was time to more fully

explore the organization's hidden assumptions. Through exercises that pushed the group to think about the invisible aspects of culture, McKnight started to see the hidden rules of the dominant culture in our country and in its own offices. McKnight began to see how various HR policies may unintentionally privilege some styles and approaches while marginalizing others. This made the organization more conscious of its norms and helped people see that saying "that's just the way we do things around here" was the sound of minimizing differences.

"I'm a direct communicator," Christiansen says. "And it's served me very well in my career. But now I can see that my communication style is a personal and cultural preference." Christiansen realizes that being culturally competent means being more open to other communication styles, and actively working toward being more accepting and accommodating.

Implementing Change for Real Results

Soon, McKnight was ready to start putting what they learned into practice. The next step was to form what's called Action Learning Teams, small groups tasked with bringing organizational change using the new cultural competency mindset. Nearly half of all Foundation employees participated in an Action Learning Team. After staff identified key areas where they recommended seeing changes to policies and procedures, McKnight settled on three focus areas for the Action Learning Teams: deeper learning, grantmaking, and employee leave policies on bereavement and holidays. Each team was charged with collecting feedback from their colleagues, developing a plan and making specific recommendations.

"The simplest one was Human Resources," Christiansen says. "One of the outcomes was the decision to change from having 11 assigned holidays to having 12 non-assigned holidays that people choose for themselves and then observe." Even a seemingly simple change like this wasn't so simple. "The switch has ramifications for facilities, for reception, for operations, and for the people in HR," she says. In the end, the group was able to implement the change.

In the summer of 2017, the group held an all-staff retreat that marked a capstone to all these months of learning and testing new ideas. The facilitators revealed the results of a recent reassessment

the staff had taken. Everyone wondered if the time, money and effort that McKnight employees invested over the 18 months resulted in increased effectiveness in Intercultural Development. IDI trainers say the shift from Minimization to Acceptance, the next orientation on the developmental continuum, is one of the most difficult; most organizations do not shift immediately. When it was revealed that McKnight's intercultural development had indeed shifted to Acceptance, the room broke into applause and there was a collective "Whoop!" at the news of the developmental shift.

At the staff retreat, Wolford made it clear that the Foundation's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion didn't end with the IDI staff trainings. "We see it as mission-critical to have our staff be better equipped to engage across differences, and the IDI was one tool to help us increase organizational capacity and effectiveness," she says. "The next step is continuing this development while increasing our area of focus to advance diversity, equity and inclusion through our policies, practices and behaviors. We have identified some next steps including deeper learning on implicit bias and structural racism to inform our strategy and approach. Using what we have learned

- 1 Nehrwr Abdul-Wahid leads McKnight Foundation staff on an intercultural bridging strategies session.
- 2 Alfonso Wenker and Nehrwr Abdul-Wahid lead McKnight staff in an IDI Guided Development session.
- 3 McKnight staff participates in an IDI Guided Development table session.
- 4 Karyn Sciortino Johnson discusses emerging tension points during an IDI workshop.
- 5 Callie Londo addresses staff during an IDI workshop.
- 6 Alfonso Wenker leads McKnight staff as they prepare for their action learning presentations.
- 7 Nate Wade discusses structure and accountability during an IDI staff retreat.
- 8 Alfonso Wenker leads a presentation during an IDI staff retreat.
- 9 President Kate Wolford addresses staff before an IDI session on intercultural conflict & communication styles.



If you are interested in bringing the IDI to your organization, MCF has staff trained as Qualified Administrators that can bring this tool to you as one of our many services to enhance your DEI approach. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) puts people and organizations on a developmental continuum of intercultural competency, as defined by Dr. Mitchell Hammer, of IDI, LLC. On one end of the continuum is Denial, which reflects a monocultural mindset, defined as seeing and experiencing the world primarily from one's own worldview. When individuals or groups are in this mindset, they're disinterested in other cultures and try to avoid situations where they're forced to interact with different cultures. On the other end of the continuum is Adaptation. This describes an intercultural mindset – which is defined as seeing and experiencing the world from multiple perspectives. People who use an Adaptive mindset have the capacity to comprehend difference with much greater complexity and therefore are better positioned to consciously strive to build bridges across cultures. In between are Polarization, Minimization and Acceptance.

Please inquire with MCF should you desire to begin this work. Contact Camille Cyprian, MCF Director of Program Strategy and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at ccyprian@mcf.org or 612.335.3556.

through this initial phase of work we will consider how we approach our external role as a funder, an employer, economic entity, institutional investor, convenor and thought leader.”

Institution-Wide Changes for the Better

McKnight has implemented a number of changes as a direct result of the IDI work. A program administrator in the International team is now devoting 40 percent of her time to supporting the DEI work. A DEI advisory committee – consisting of Wolford, Christiansen, and Kara Carlisle, the vice president of programs, along with the three staff leads of the original learning teams – has formed to guide staff-related work on DEI. In January of this year, McKnight released a public statement of commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. The Grantmaking Action Learning Team developed a plan to collect benchmark demographic data of the board and staff of grantees who apply for McKnight funding.

Wolford has asked everyone – regardless of position or department – to budget 5 percent of their time to intentionally focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. This can mean anything from continued individual coaching to learning from grantees who are leaders in equity work. Or it can mean actively pursuing different grantmaking outcomes, such as the Art team's ongoing work as part of the Racial Equity Funders Collaborative, or the Mississippi River team's exploration of diverse community partners.

And it's not just the program teams who are strategizing how to integrate DEI into their work. The finance, communications and operations teams have also sought ways to incorporate DEI into their practices. The reception and facilities team brainstormed ways to make McKnight's meeting space even more welcoming and inclusive. The communications team examined how to use more inclusive imagery and language and took steps to make its website more accessible to users with different abilities. At one manager's meeting, the IT director asked, “Do we have any guidance on how to talk to business partners about diversity? Because I'd like to speak to a partner organization that has no diversity on their staff.”

“We recognize this is a journey, and we won't always get it right,” says Wolford. “We've had uncomfortable conversations and moments of consternation. We'll always be impatient to see results faster. Even so, we are encouraged by the shared commitment among board and staff alike to more fully embody the values and vision we seek with and for our community.” 🐾



Dennis Cass is a writer whose work has appeared in the New York Times Magazine, Mother Jones and the online journal Slate. He is also the author of *HEAD CASE: How I Almost Lost My Mind Trying to Understand My Brain* (HarperCollins). Dennis lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his wife and son and wouldn't have it any other way.



Navigating the Neutral Zone

What Happened During the In-Between Time in Our DEI Work

BY BERNADETTE CHRISTIANSEN

The neutral zone, as defined by William Bridges, is an in-between time. Bridges, a leading authority on change management, explains that transitions require letting go of what was, navigating a time of uncertainty in between, and accepting a new beginning. Think of a trapeze artist. In order to grab onto the new trapeze, the artist must first let go of the trapeze in her hands. The neutral zone is the time when the artist is flying from one trapeze to another.

The neutral zone is uncomfortable for most people, and organizations are often under tremendous pressure to avoid it. But, just as there are predictable stages of grief, so too are there predictable stages of transition. Psychologists have learned that all of the stages of grief are necessary. The same applies to transition: there is an end, a neutral zone, and a beginning. Organizations tend to go straight from one ending to the next beginning and skip the uncomfortable in-between time, but the neutral zone is needed for transition to actually take root.

Organizations tend to go straight from one ending to the next beginning and skip the uncomfortable in-between time, but the neutral zone is needed for transition to actually take root.

Leadership coach Shana Montesol Johnson explains it this way: “The neutral zone is the heart of transition. Like when a seed is underground, waiting to germinate, there doesn’t seem to be much going on, but it’s a very fertile and important time. This is where the questioning, growth, learning, formation, courage, creativity, and risk-taking happens.”

At the McKnight Foundation, we entered the neutral zone as our clearly defined work on cultural

competency using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), within a clearly articulated timeline, ended. In the nine months between the retreat that marked the conclusion of the formal IDI learning process and the launch of a new learning and implementation cycle related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), we heard comments such as these:

- ▶ “Now what?”
- ▶ “Can we just do something?”
- ▶ “We spent all the time and nothing is really going to change ...”

McKnight’s pivot from a process focused on IDI to a broader focus on DEI was a call to change and to build systems and structures to support the desired change.

The time between the last session focused on cultural competency in late June 2017 to the first session focused more specifically on DEI in early April 2018 was difficult, productive, and filled with ambiguity. While we accomplished work during this period, the boundaries of the work lacked clarity.

Shortly after the June retreat, 40 percent of one McKnight staff member’s job was allocated to



supporting the Foundation's DEI work.

Other important accomplishments during our neutral zone include the following:

- ▶ A board-staff workgroup drafted a DEI statement with a vision statement; definitions of what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean at McKnight; and a commitment to the work. Contextual notes give depth and meaning to the statement.
- ▶ At the November 2017 board meeting, the board unanimously approved the DEI statement.
- ▶ The Foundation president directed all staff members to include “Race and...” DEI goals in individual and teamwork plans for 2018.
- ▶ The Foundation staff developed three guidelines which we call “Simple Agreements” to help guide how we work together:
 - Turn judgment into curiosity.
 - Turn disagreement into shared exploration.
 - Take the next wise action.
- ▶ The DEI advisory group interviewed three external consultants and hired one to help discern, facilitate, and guide the next phase of work.
- ▶ The DEI advisory group began to solidify its purpose and its members' roles and responsibilities—those that are common and those that are positional.
- ▶ At a staff meeting on November 20, 2017, the DEI advisory group shared a list of outcomes from the Foundation's work related to DEI, and small groups provided input using an adaptive action model called “What-So What-Now What” on next steps.

In sum, the Foundation was creating new processes and defining new roles after the retreat, but just as Bridges would have predicted, things were in flux, and it didn't feel comfortable yet.

In April 2018 the Foundation launched the new beginning. There has been a return to a defined cycle and timeline incorporating clear learning objectives, a stated focus for work, and scheduled times to convene as a full staff.

We believe there will be meaningful individual learning and growth and significant system, policy, and practice shifts to support the new DEI statement during this cycle. We know that this cycle too will end, setting the stage for another difficult, messy, and critical neutral zone before the next new beginning on this journey.



Contextual Notes to McKnight’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In 2017, a board-staff work group formed to discuss what major concepts should be included in the organization’s Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Written by Na Eng, McKnight’s communications director, we offer these accompanying notes to share some of the behind-the-scenes thinking and processing that led to the development of the Statement.

The opening paragraph offers a vision of the world that the McKnight Foundation has sought to create through decades of philanthropy. This positive vision, with allusions to specific program goals that have long been a part of McKnight’s mission, emphasizes that it is essential for us all to have our basic needs met and to have genuine opportunities to thrive, as opposed to the illusion of access to opportunities.

Imagine a world where every child recognizes the sacredness of their humanity.

This opening sentence gives a nod to our Education program, which is focused entirely on education equity. It was inspired in part by the words of a staff member at Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood, a McKnight grantee and a recipient of a Facing Race Award, who said they aim

“ . . . to work very arduously and very deeply with people in our schools and in our neighborhood to just remind them of their sacredness as people . . . ”

While our use of their may be ungrammatical, it has become common in modern speech. An increasing number of lexicographers are accepting this plural pronoun as a gender-neutral alternative to the masculine his.

And every family has enough to eat and a place to call home . . .

“Enough to eat” refers to our International team’s Collaborative Crop Research Program ([CCRP](#)), which has made deep investments in research that supports small shareholder farmers in hunger hot spots around the world. The effort helps ensure that “all have access to nutritious food that is sustainably produced.”

“A place to call home” refers to the long-standing work in affordable housing by our Region & Communities (R&C) team. Rather than list every single social area where we seek improvement; e.g., jobs, childcare, and transportation, we chose home and nourishment to represent the concept of attending to basic needs .

... no matter the color of their skin or the ZIP code of their birth.

“Color of their skin” is a first reference to an explicit call to recognize the deeply flawed social construct of race. This statement is about “race and-” other differences. More on this later. “ZIP code” gets at the large body of research telling us that place of birth-a high- vs. low-opportunity neighborhood-can predict a person’s life outcomes. It also captures the notion of “fairness between places,” a frame recommended by the [Frameworks Institute](#).

Imagine how much higher we could soar in our arts and sciences if we realized that ingenuity comes from all quarters, and we sought out hidden assets.

This refers to our Arts program, which seeks to invest in working artists. The program has responded vigorously to research by [Holly Sidford](#) and others that calls out the tremendous disparities in philanthropy to artists and arts organizations of color.

The sentence also refers to the Neuroscience program, which has been intentional about gender and geographic diversity, as well as our Mississippi River program, which recently explored a cross-sector conversation with R&C about environmental justice. It also references CCRP, which has long invested in local leadership development and strives to achieve global equity.

“Hidden assets” refers to the story of the previously unrecognized contributions of the African American mathematicians who helped NASA reach the moon in the 1960s. The women portrayed in Margot Lee Shetterly’s book [Hidden Figures](#) offer a vivid lesson on how drawing from diverse talent can propel everyone forward, while systemic prejudice only serves to hold us back.

Another example can be found closer to home, in Pelican Rapids, Minnesota. Apprehensive at first, longtime residents of Pelican Rapids eventually came to value the newcomers and the economic resurgence they brought to their town.

Both stories offer a “win-win” frame. This asset-based frame helps us avoid the common pitfalls of the deficit-based rescue narrative that [Trabian Shorters](#) warns only deepens racial stigmas.

[Dr. Robert Mwanga’s](#) World Food Prize-winning research on sweet potato biofortification is a concrete example of how CCRP has leaned in to find hidden assets among researchers, farmers, and leaders in Africa and South America, not as an act of charity, but as a strategic way to help them achieve their goals.

The [Energy Foundation](#), a grantee of the Midwest Climate & Energy program, described a strategic alliance with Latino and African American leaders in Illinois who saw clean energy jobs as a civil rights issue. Building a coalition with many community groups from all walks of life helped to catapult a renewable energy policy win over the top. The R&C program supports similar

leadership pipeline and collaboration strategies.

Imagine if everyone could enjoy the bounty of the land that has sustained us for generations, and we could come together to preserve our one and only Earth.

This is in reference to our Midwest Climate & Energy and Mississippi River programs, and its earlier incarnation, the Environment program, as well as open space, biking, public transportation, and other funding by the R&C program to support vital neighborhoods and community development.

Here, we also allude to the generations of indigenous people, including American Indians, that came before us as careful stewards of the land, and the existential planetary crisis we face because of accelerating climate change.

Guided by this vision, the McKnight Foundation is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values.

Diversity: We appreciate and leverage our differences, and we involve and reflect the communities we serve.

Equity: We align our policies, practices, and resources so that people of all races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses have genuine opportunities to thrive.

Inclusion: We create an environment in which everyone feels valued and respected.

Rather than present textbook definitions, we offer our interpretation of how DEI can be meaningful as well as some broad guidance on how we might begin to shift institutional behavior.

For those who seek fuller definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the board-staff work group offers the following, which are modified versions of definitions from Independent Sector and used by groups such as Grantmakers in the Arts:

Diversity means all the ways in which people differ, from demographic identity and life experience to diversity of thought.

Equity is fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people so that all may thrive regardless of cultural, racial, or socioeconomic status. Fairness may require different strategies depending on different contexts to reach universal goals.

Inclusion is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate.

We lift up “racial, cultural, and socioeconomic status” specifically, which matches the language in our [Strategic Framework](#) and fits the context of our place-based perspective and our grantmaking areas. Given our work with indigenous and immigrant communities as well as communities in Greater Minnesota, this scope is broad enough to encompass the diversity of communities in our grantmaking programs while offering some containers to help us stay focused.

This statement is a “race AND . . .” approach because we respect the role of intersectionality and recognize the need to increase our interdevelopmental capacity to navigate all the differences that make a difference, including areas where we do not do grantmaking. For example, our inclusive hospitality stance means offering accommodations for nursing mothers, space for prayer or meditation, and bathrooms for varying gender identities. This example demonstrates inclusion in action; publicly stating it marks a recent shift in institutional behavior.

This commitment is critical to deepening our relevance, credibility, and effectiveness, and it will strengthen our mission to improve the lives of present and future generations.

The “mission-critical frame” has been effective at other organizations, such as Diversity Matters. President Kate Wolford issued a clarion call for us to view DEI as a way to increase our “relevance, credibility, and effectiveness.” This call to action grounds us to the reality that what is at stake is our mission itself—that we simply cannot achieve our goals without this commitment.

The second half of the sentence, “improve the lives of present and future generations,” ties this work directly to our mission statement. Together, this signals how we see DEI as core to and

“...we see DEI as core to and embedded in our mission rather than as a separate or additional goal.”

embedded in our mission rather than as a separate or additional goal. This also responds to Kate’s request that the statement answer: “Why us? Why now?”

The civic and economic vitality of our home state of Minnesota, known as Mni Sota Makoce to the Dakota, depends on inclusive and equitable opportunities for everyone.

“The civic and economic vitality” sentiment comes from our Strategic Framework. It speaks to the disparities in our home state, as well as the need for us to harness all of our assets to ensure prosperity and growth in our region. Here, we honor the Dakota Sioux, and their contributions and heritage long before the formation of our state.

We see many ways to realize this vision as a funder, convenor, thought leader, and as an employer, economic entity, and institutional investor.

This sentence was inspired by the multiple identities beyond grantmaking called out in our Strategic Framework, as well as MCF’s Framework on DEI, which urges foundations to recognize the power they wield in a variety of roles. We can find many examples of innovation in this area in Operations, which modified our holiday policy for inclusiveness, and in the Finance department, whose impact investing initiative calls us to see and act on our identity as an institutional investor.

In all we do, we seek to be conscious of and address the deeply entrenched practices, cultural norms, and decision making structures that perpetuate inequities.

“Like a birdcage, racism is a discrete arrangement of structures that limits potential and possibility.”

—john a. powell

This builds on the Foundation’s longstanding practice of looking at social change from a systems perspective.

In a concept called “structural racialization,” scholar [john a. powell](#) argues that we need to look beyond expressions of personal animus and focus on how people are organized within structures, and to recognize that “we use structures to marginalize people.” He uses a birdcage as a metaphor to explain this system lens.

Quoting Dr. powell in this [video](#):

“Looking at each of the bars of a cage, it’s hard to understand why it would restrict the bird. Examining the cage in its entirety allows one to see how the bars link together to form a structure with a greater restrictive effect than each bar could have on its own. Only when the bars are connected and arranged in a specific way does it form a cage. Like a birdcage, racism is a discrete arrangement of structures that limits potential and possibility. A structural racism lens, therefore, is needed to make sense of the complex interplay of factors that reproduce racial disparities and depress opportunities.”

Thus, he urges us to look at race from a multidimensional perspective, examining the relationships and connections between certain societal forces instead of the forces alone.

Racial discrimination is a legacy of our nation’s painful history; and institutional racism and unconscious bias persist.

It is essential to reflect on historical context as we consider our present reality. We must also be mindful of implicit bias, an area of extensive research by [Project Implicit](#) and [The Kirwan Institute](#) for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, among many others. McKnight staff have engaged with Alexs Pate of [Innocent Technologies](#) to explore some of these issues further.

Equity means receiving what one needs to succeed, as we are not all born with the same opportunities.

Our expression of equity borrows heavily from john a. powell’s theories of racial situatedness” and “[targeted universalism](#)” and helps to convey the meaningful distinctions between equality and equity. Powell observes that individuals and population groups are situated differently relative to the networks and systems that determine life outcomes, and that we therefore need to focus on solutions that account for situated variance. He says the data overwhelmingly show that this variance is frequently associated with race.

In addition, Angela Glover Blackwell offers this [reflection on equity](#), which touches on how systems can be better designed to support the principle of structural fairness. She says, “Equality gives

everyone the right to ride on the bus, in any seat they choose. Equity ensures there are bus lines where people need them so they can get to school or the doctor or work.”

The second half of this sentence taps the ambitious research on American values and aspirations that the Ford Foundation commissioned and Hattaway Communications conducted. Their research shows that fairness is a cherished belief that is understood in multiple ways. Overall, there is strong consensus that some people have more opportunities than others. According to the researchers, “Linguistic analysis of some 200,000 words uttered in a dozen focus groups in 2016 showed that people expressed the idea that our opportunities in life are influenced to a great degree by the circumstances of our birth.”

We approach our work on diversity, equity, and inclusion with courage and optimism—knowing it requires a sustained commitment.

Board members have emphasized the need for courage throughout our DEI journey because we are fully aware that it can be difficult to speak explicitly about race and other differences in this country. The Foundation has also been widely regarded for being able and willing to take a long-term perspective in its grantmaking. We recognize that this undertaking requires strategic patience, and that success will come only if we take a long view.

When we make mistakes along the way, we will adapt and continue to learn.

Here, we refer to the Foundation’s long tradition of humility and adaptive action. We acknowledge our limits. We see the need to continually push ourselves, to do the best we can to find our next wise actions while striving to learn from our experiences and constantly adapt.

This work is our shared responsibility—and our shared *opportunity*—because what is at stake is nothing less than our shared fate.

Here, we call up our shared aspirations once again. “Shared fate” is another recommended frame, according to a 2015 [report](#) called “Let’s Talk About Race” commissioned by the Center for Social Inclusion.

Resources

Here is a list of resources the McKnight Foundation used during the first phase of work on cultural competency and in the “neutral zone” as the Foundation moved to phase two.

TOOLS WE USED

- ▶ [Intercultural Development Inventory \(IDI\)](#)
- ▶ [Intercultural Conflict Styles Inventory \(ICS\)](#)
- ▶ [Action Learning Teams](#)
- ▶ [Adaptive Action](#)

WRITTEN RESOURCES WE FOUND HELPFUL

- ▶ [“The Road to Achieving Equity: Findings and Lessons from a Field Scan of Foundations That Are Embracing Equity as a Primary Focus,”](#) Kris Putnam-Walkerly, MSW and Elizabeth Russell, Putnam Consulting, September 2016.
- ▶ [Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide: 7 Steps to Advance and Embed Race Equity and Inclusion Within Your Organization,](#) The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014.
- ▶ Other resources we found meaningful are hyperlinks in the contextual notes for McKnight’s DEI statement.

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