Strategic Pivot to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Crafting a Competitive Grant Application

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GPC Competencies:

04. Knowledge of How to Craft, Construct, and Submit an Effective Grant Application
09. Ability to Write a Convincing Case for Funding

Abstract

The terms "diversity," "equity" and "inclusion" echo through grantmaking institutions. As a result, these institutions are analyzing how their grantees address all three topics internally and externally. This strategy paper explains how to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in grant applications. These strategies apply to early career and mid-level grant professionals in various fields. Applying these action items while developing a proposal can distinguish an organization's case for funding in a competitive application process.

Introduction: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Defined

Several foundations analyze how their grantees address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) both internally and externally. Diversity includes human differences, such as race and ethnicity, disability, and gender (Chow & GrantCraft, 2018). Equity is defined as the promotion of justice, impartiality, and fairness within the processes and distribution of resources by institutions or systems (Chow & GrantCraft, 2018). Inclusion refers to the degree to which diverse individuals can fully participate in decision-making processes (Paradiso, 2020).

Strategies to Incorporate DEI

Several foundations are exploring their grantees' commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Exhibits A and B show how the Ford Foundation and the McKnight Foundation expanded their DEI section in both their application and reporting processes. For instance, the Ford Foundation has enhanced its protocol for discussing how potential grantees demonstrate their commitment to diversity. The McKnight Foundation integrated a diversity, equity, and inclusion information form into its grant application process. The form requires potential grantees to address whether their organization has an inclusive workplace and how their grant proposal advances equity (McKnight Foundation, 2018).

Answering such questions requires grant applicants to explain how their organization's commitment to DEI efforts extends beyond legal requirements (see the sample form from the McKnight Foundation below). An anonymous member from Grant Zone, a private community for members of Grant Professionals Association, provided the following suggestions in response to a 2019 post:
If the organization operates a school-based program, demographics, and numbers of students who receive free and reduced-price school meals are available. If the organization is a hospital or health program, demographics and payer mix are available (Anonymous Member, 2019).

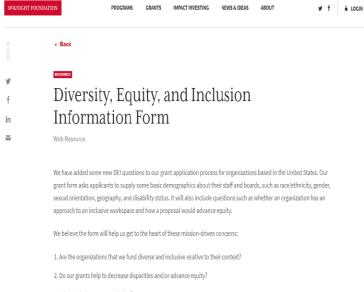A grant applicant should also consider the following when answering DEI questions:
- Describe the steps your organization is taking to ensure underserved populations have access to its services.
- Explain how the board and staff represent your organization's target population. If not, outline your organization's plan to diversify its board and staff. To advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the communities they serve, organizations must understand the people being served and the communities impacted.
- If your organization offers programs, explain how it reduces cost barriers for participants.
- Is cultural competency training provided to the board and staff?

If your organization has not implemented DEI strategies, it is important to be transparent about this during the grant application process. First, identify the challenges your organization faces in implementing such strategies. Then, describe the proposed solutions. A scenario is provided below.
Scenario: Your organization has maintained a 50% turnover rate among minority staff for three consecutive years.
Response: Explain the steps your organization is taking to implement an equitable hiring and selection process. Consider how your organization prioritizes professional development for new hires.

Importance of DEI Investment

There is a growing shift in the perception of diversity, equity, and inclusion within organizations. The early stages of diversity education focused on 1) maintaining compliance to avoid legal consequences and 2) increasing individual diversity awareness (Vaughn, 2007). Individual awareness did not create

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Protocol for Discussing Diversity with Grantees

FORD FOUNDATION

The Ford Foundation articulates its commitment to diversity in terms of the quality it seeks to achieve, both in desired results and the "talent pools" from which it draws. In reviewing proposals, program staff work through a set of open-ended questions with potential grantees on a case-by-case basis to clarify the connection between diversity and quality. Grant makers may also take certain steps, including providing additional support, to help grantees meet diversity goals.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What forms of diversity (gender, racial, cultural, religious, immigrant/refugee background, linguistic, etc.) do you think are important for strengthening the quality of the work proposed and why? Does your organization's staff and governance reflect this diversity?
- How do you propose to draw upon diverse perspectives in the community or field that the proposed work will serve?
- What diversity challenges does your organization face in its work overall?
- What progress has your organization made to increase its diversity in the last two to three years?

MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION   PROGRAMS   GRANTS   IMPACT INVESTING   NEWS & IDEAS   ABOUT

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RESOURCE

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Information Form

Web Resource

We have added some new DEI questions to our grant application process for organizations based in the United States. Our grant form asks applicants to supply some basic demographics about their staff and boards, such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, geography, and disability status. It will also include questions such as whether an organization has an approach to an inclusive workspace and how a proposal would advance equity.

We believe the form will help us get to the heart of these mission-driven concerns:

1. Are the organizations that we fund diverse and inclusive relative to their context?
2. Do our grants help to decrease disparities and/or advance equity?
3. What and whom are we missing?

systematic change. As a result, many systems, structures, and processes remained unaffected (Vaughn, 2007).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are key elements in enhancing organizational effectiveness. According to Green 2.0's 2017 survey on diversity, 100% of senior foundation staff and more than 90% of nonprofit professionals recognized that diversity enables organizations to be more connected to the communities they serve. Including perspectives from diverse individuals leads to better solutions to social issues. Ninety percent of all respondents also recognized that diversity increases creativity within an organization.

Philanthropic investments have not always prioritized DEI efforts. In 2013, the largest U.S. foundations grant awards totaled $24 billion (Chow & GrantCraft, 2018). Data retrieved from Candid, formerly named Foundation Center, suggests that only about 7% of those funds were designated to support ethnic and racial minorities (Chow & GrantCraft, 2018). National foundations are leading the movement in supporting organizations that address disparities and inequities. In 2015, The Ford Foundation launched a $1 billion BUILD (Building Institutions and Networks) initiative to help its social justice grantees build resilience and achieve sustainability (Ford Foundation, 2021). Since 2015, the foundation has awarded grants to 350 organizations through the initiative (Ford Foundation, 2021). More than 60% of the organizations are led by women. In 2021, the foundation announced an additional $1 billion commitment to address inequalities (Ford Foundation, 2021). According to the foundation, the BUILD grants enable grantees to create clearer long-term strategies, make critical investments in talent and leadership, and invest in their financial sustainability (Ford Foundation, 2021). Other foundations are following suit. In 2021, the Walton Family Foundation announced a $15 million grant to the 1954 Project, an initiative of the Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education to advance Black leadership in education (Walton Family Foundation, 2021).

There are several resources available for organizations that wish to advance their grantseeking practices using a DEI lens. Examples of resources include:

Tools for Organizational Self-Assessment Related to Racial Equity, Coalition of Communities of Color

Advancing the Mission: Tools for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit, Race Forward

Step-by-Step: A Guide to Achieving Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace, Diversity & Inclusion Initiative Implementing Diversity, Marilyn Loden (book)

Conclusion

Advancing DEI efforts have been an ongoing organizational challenge. While organizations have made progress, continual work is required. As organizations continue to advance DEI efforts, they should assess and identify gaps to determine where to concentrate their focus. Funders collect grantee data that highlights how organizations support diversity, equity, and inclusion. To craft a competitive grant application, applicants should incorporate a DEI lens that best reflects the organization's mission, values, and organizational culture.

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Brittany Alexander, GPC, is the development manager for a national organization. Since 2015, Brittany has secured more than $13 million for small, mid-size, and large organizations. She has unique experiences as a grant professional for both direct service and advocacy organizations at the state and national levels. She can be reached at baalexander08@gmail.com.