

McKnight Artist Fellowships Community Values: A Story of Shared Power

New in 2021, the McKnight Artist Fellowships are implementing a statement of shared community values across the program's 14 partnering organizations (*Minnesota Center for Book Arts, Northern Clay Center, The Cowles Center, American Composers Forum, Pillsbury House Theater, Textile Center, FilmNorth, MacPhail Center for Music, The Playwrights' Center, Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, The Loft*). As you'll see below, 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 from harm, prejudice, and harassment. This comes at a time when communities within Minnesota and across the country are wrestling with how best to approach issues of community safety and seeking to create alternatives to an overreliance on institutional policing. Notably, discussions of equity within philanthropy often focus exclusively on the distribution of resources and this is a vital wing of the bird. What follows is a story about the other wing -- the sharing of power -- and how an opening to the active engagement of and a willingness to learn with our partners resulted in better decision-making, policy development, and practices for McKnight, our fellowships program partners, and for the artists and those who participate in the McKnight Artist Fellowships community.

McKnight Artist Fellowships Program & Partners

The McKnight Foundation established the [McKnight Artist Fellowships](#) to provide financial resources and development opportunities to midcareer artists with distinguished bodies of work who were 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 each in 14 different artistic disciplines and partners with 14 discipline-specific artist service organizations in to administer the fellowships and support the experience of the fellows. I serve as McKnight's Director of Artist Fellowships and my responsibilities include coordinating the fellowships program and nurturing the fellowships community. Five times each year, McKnight and fellowship program partners gather to share learning, to problem solve, and to offer mutual support. In recent years, the coalition has also convened task forces and working groups to do collective planning, to update the program's eligibility requirements, and to develop greater budgetary alignment across the multiple administrative sites.

Issues of Conduct

The arts are a microcosm of the issues present in our broader society. In the nearly 40 years 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 and solutions were forged in more of a piecemeal fashion outside of a specific policy directive from McKnight or the establishment of consistent practices amongst our fellowship partners. These issues have 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 existing organizational policies related to conduct and behavior. 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 the Me Too movements, have elevated the need for evolving clear guidance to equip McKnight and our fellowship partners to respond with intention and consistency. Toward this end, I committed to convene a task force with fellowship partners who had

experienced conduct-related issues in recent years to explore a prospective policy response and to recommend effective practices for use across fellowships 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 Program. The Vice President of Finance and 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. In summary, McKnight's initial recommendations were as follows:

- Articulate expectations of conduct & behavior during fellowship experience
- Articulate a commitment to "character & fitness" of selected fellows
- Ask applicants to disclose felony convictions (w/i last 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 consequences if failure to disclose – e.g. loss of fellowship; return of funds
- Conduct background checks for fellows (prior to issuing award)

At a different time, involving different people or a different organization, the recommendations coming from the foundation's leadership in consultation with the organization's lawyers and centering foundation's compliance and liability interests may have been the end of the conversation. These recommendations would have translated to directives to be unilaterally delivered to grantee partners for implementation. But, that's not what happened. 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.

The Conduct Task Force

In the September and October 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 present in the McKnight Artist Fellowships program and to consider and respond to the foundation's initial recommendations. Fellowship program partners and past fellows participated from the Loft, FilmNorth, Pillsbury House Theater, Highpoint Center for Printmaking, and the Cowles Center.

From the start, the 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's work began by reviewing examples of existing policies including an anti-harassment policy for McKnight employees and codes of conduct being used at partnering organizations. McKnight's initial recommendations were helpful in that they 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 a scope of applicability and the parameters of the community. The group had a robust dialogue regarding felonies and scenarios involving criminal charges and arrests. 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 contradicted the goal of a celebratory and supportive fellowships experience. We also had a specific interest in lifting up possibilities for reconciliation and restorative justice. Finally, in the discussion on background checks, there was a consensus that background checks were similarly 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 articulate the kind of community that we wanted to create and inhabit rather than attempt to police 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, or 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.

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 start 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 selected fellows (where they can review and agree to the community values statement)
- Add incident notification clauses to partner grant agreements
- McKnight to share the statement with the artist community and to share process learnings with the field

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, and staff of the McKnight Foundation and partnering organizations. As a community, we commit to creating and

maintaining relationships that are free from 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, legal action, or conviction, the McKnight Foundation and its fellowship program partners may gather and assess relevant information. If deemed necessary, the McKnight Foundation and its fellowship program partners may take administrative action up to and including the recommendation of participation in reconciliation or restorative justice processes; 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 and our aim is to collectively create an experience in which all artists and members of the McKnight Artist Fellowships community thrive.

A Shared Success

McKnight's arts and senior leadership and the entire body of the artist fellowships partners fully supported the recommendations of Conduct Task Force and the statement of McKnight Artist Fellowships Community Values. We celebrate the process for its diligence and inclusivity as well as for fostering a sense of collective agency and ownership rooted in shared problem solving, shared learning, and shared power.