

## 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 Mwangi'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 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.**

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

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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.**

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](#):

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

—john a. powell

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“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.