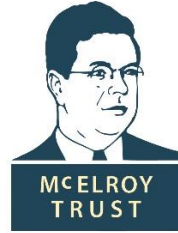


GEO Member Story



How strong relationships with its grantees and connections to the nonprofit community inspired the R.J. McElroy Trust to streamline its grantmaking processes.

Since 1965, the R.J. McElroy Trust has funded a broad range of projects to benefit, inspire, and transform youth in northeast Iowa. In the past 35 years, the trust has awarded \$60,000,000 in grants to nearly 1,700 youth-serving organizations across 15 Iowa counties. Building on these years of experience — and a focus on strengthening personal relationships with grantees — the trust has shifted its process to better support nonprofit effectiveness.

To do this, the McElroy Trust works flexibly, openly and closely with its grantees to ensure they have the time and space to pursue their work by reducing application burden and communicating more effectively. Practices such as pre-application phone calls to both filter out ineligible applicants and to start building relationships, as well as revising guidelines to ask only questions that provide the most important information, help the trust build more respectful relationships. In short, they acknowledge applicants' time constraints: "Our goal is to make the McElroy Trust the easiest place to seek funding for good ideas. This doesn't mean we lack rigor. We have high standards and a strategic point of view. But we try to ensure grant seekers don't have to jump through hoops" said Dr. Stacy Van Gorp, executive director of R.J. McElroy Trust.

Like many foundations during the recession, the McElroy Trust's assets dropped dramatically; the trust's grant approval rate dropped from about 60 percent in 2005 to less than 30 percent. This period is when the trust began collecting data on how long it took applicants to apply for funding. McElroy's original process was a four to six page application with standardized questions that required supplementary documents. On average it took grantees 10 hours to complete a four to six page application. More concerning, data showed that there was no correlation between the board's decision to fund a project and the amount of time applicants spent writing a grant application.

The trust's assessment painted a troubling picture. In 2012, with the ideas and tools from [Grant Manager Network's Project Streamline](#), R.J. McElroy Trust implemented practices to reduce the burden of application and reporting on its nonprofit partners, while still getting the information it needs to make good grantmaking decisions. Streamlining also allowed the trust to see the redundancy of asking questions it already knew the answers to. "For example, we asked the Boys and Girls Club to describe their mission and organization *every year*. Even though we had funded them several times." Van Gorp said. "If we want to know something — like the organizational budget or board list — we look it up or call them." Under the new application, every applicant is asked to send only a one-page letter. They submit no attachments or forms. If the Board needs

additional information, staff works closely with applicants to identify exact information needed to make funding decisions.

The results of the new streamlined approach were spectacular. Applicants now spend only three hours on average to request funds from the McElroy Trust. In an average year, the streamlined process saves grant seekers a total of about 840 hours. The trust has also found this streamlined process provided more clarity and allowed it to better understand the requests. Van Gorp explained: “I think it's easier for the Board and staff to focus on the essence of the project. We are less likely to get ‘in the weeds’ when we are reviewing. It helps us live out our values of exhibiting humility about what we know and honoring what our grantees know.”

Though some applicants find it difficult to share their ideas in one page, surveys show that 70% of grant applicants like the new process. The trust makes it clear to applicants that the best way to apply for funding is to start a relationship. It shares that the long standing practice of having organizations call for advice before they apply is the best antidote to people who feel that having a one page application isn't enough.

To further improve its streamlining process, the trust recently eliminated deadlines and increased the number of times a year it reviews proposals from four to six. These practices show that flexibility and highly strategic grantmaking aren't mutually exclusive. Though a result of streamlining is an easier application process, that isn't the only benefit to grantmakers and their nonprofit partners. Streamlining helps to ensure the best use of everyone's time and resources, foundation and nonprofit staff alike. Grantmakers play a community leadership role with the organizations they fund and can benefit from trusting their grantees and acknowledging their expertise. The R.J. McElroy Trust's streamlining work is an excellent example of practices that help grantmakers to strengthen their relationships with grantees and further support nonprofit resilience.

To find out more information about R.J. McElroy Trust, please visit <http://mcelroytrust.org/>.

GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight

[Due Diligence Done Well: A Guide For Grantmakers](#)



[The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: Strengthening Relationships with Grantees](#)



[Strategic Co-Funding: An Approach For Expanded Impact](#)

