

MAKING GRANTS WORK FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

SCALING WHAT WORKS IN EQUITABLE
GRANTMAKING: STRATEGIC
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS,
INSTITUTIONS, AND APPLICANTS



HOW WE BUILT CAPACITY TO CREATE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

Equitable processes don't just evaluate applicants fairly; they help applicants succeed. The Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce's approach integrated capacity building to strengthen both the grant process and outcomes.

How Intentional Grantmaking Maximizes Community Investment

Traditional grantmaking often rewards the "best grant writers," not necessarily the best ideas. Our methodology reinvests the full grant pool into the community while allocating an additional portion of funding to a four-phase capacity-building engine. Through this process, we learned that approximately 25% beyond the total funding pool should be allocated to grant program supports, separate from a standard administrative fee. This enhancement ensures impact data is captured, storytelling is documented, and grantees are better positioned to secure future funding and long-term success beyond the initial award.

1

Pre-Application Engagement (Reaching the "hard-to-reach")

Equity begins before the portal opens. So we did not just wait for applicants; we prepared them.

- **Trust-Based Outreach:** We partnered with local community-based organizations to reach businesses that typically miss opportunities.
- **Resource Libraries:** We included templates, clear guidance, video tutorials, and additional grant lists in the application, ensuring key information was accessible to everyone.

2

Integrated Technical Assistance (Closing the Skill Gap)

We provided intensive help to ensure merit, not just writing, shines through.

- **Grant-Writing Assistance:** One-on-one help and virtual group calls helped applicants translate their vision into competitive proposals.
- **Office Hours:** Drop-in sessions to fix technical errors, clarify eligibility, and reduce administrative disqualifications.

3

Ensuring a Fair Review

To counter misconceptions of favoritism, the methodology employed a thoughtful, data-driven protocol.

- **Anonymized Responses:** We anonymized applications where appropriate to reduce unconscious bias and prioritize merit-based evaluation
- **Structured Rubrics:** We trained reviewers on specific equity considerations and calibrated scoring through sample applications to ensure consistency.

4

Post-Submission Support (Turning "No" into Growth)

The process didn't end with a "No." Every applicant was supported to walk away stronger.

- **Educational Debriefs:** Grant experts were available to offer specific, constructive feedback to non-selected applicants. Rejection became an opportunity for future funding success, even with other funders.
- **Implementation Support:** For those funded, we provided weekly check-ins to support project sustainability and success. We also collected stories and images about the impact in person.

The ROI of Equity

By investing in this approach, funder ecosystems can spark
Diverse Portfolios | Higher Quality Proposals | Systemic Change

Note: Most CBC grantees were new to funding and managed to secure an additional \$222,000 in add-on funding with this methodology.

FOUR KEY WAYS FUNDER CHOICES CREATE EQUITABLE FUNDING

Equitable funding requires intentional design. This means infrastructure, not just more programs. Build trust in the process by ensuring clear outreach, fair review, and support for applicants, outreach partners, and other funders.



Figure 1. Equitable funding design emphasizes access, applicant support, fair review processes, and continuous learning across the funding lifecycle.

#1 Convene and Align with Other Funders

- Align early on shared goals, timelines, and standards based on lessons already learned.
- Identify opportunities to leverage or braid funding and reduce duplication for applicants.
- At gatherings, coordinate outreach and strengthen alignment across partners.

#2 Help Make Outreach and Access a Team Effort

- Partner with trusted community messengers to reach small, emerging, under-resourced applicants.
- Pair digital outreach with direct follow-up (calls, texts, in-person touch points) to close access gaps.
- Share eligibility requirements, selection criteria, and timelines clearly, early, and often.

#3 Design for Applicant Support

- Budget specifically for accessible application tools (e.g. language access, interpretation, technical assistance, storytelling-forward application review via videos instead of written narratives, etc)
- Provide office hours, information sessions, and technical assistance before and after applications open, and budget for the equity infrastructure needed to deliver this support effectively.
- Use plain-language guidance and concrete examples to explain unfamiliar funding terminology.

#4 Review and Share Feedback with Applicants and Other Funders

- Communicate eligibility requirements and common questions upfront to prevent avoidable errors.
- Match the review structure to your goals:
 - Single-stage review for speed and lower administrative burden.
 - Two-tier or blinded review when credibility concerns require added assurance.
- Prepare for community feedback and clearly explain how decisions were made and evaluated.
- Offer guidance and reflective reports to help applicants be successful in future funding pursuits.

HOW APPLICANTS CAN WIN EVEN WHEN THEY ARE NOT SELECTED

The recommendations below reflect everyday experiences from applicants who did not secure as much funding as they had hoped. Review to learn more about how applicants are able to submit complete, competitive applications and make the most of available support.

Start Early and Follow Instructions

- Begin the application as soon as it opens, to allow time to review requirements, gather materials, and plan fuller responses. Read all instructions carefully and ensure all required fields are complete.
- Double-check that the correct files are attached before submitting. Missing or incorrect attachments were a common reason strong applications were deemed incomplete.

Use Available Support and Embrace Asking For Help

- Take advantage of any planned “office hours”, information sessions, and/or “technical assistance” opportunities. If you do not know how to find these, ask the funder if these resources are available. Sometimes these may only be offered upon request.
- Ask questions early if anything is unclear. These supports help strengthen applications and clarify expectations, especially for businesses that typically struggle to secure funding.
- Learn what terms like “technical assistance” and “capacity building” mean (hint: free help) and how these supports can benefit your organization and project.
- Seek support well before the grant deadline. Too often, applicants request help close to the deadline, increasing the chances that resources or funds may already be running out.
- Even if you submitted a perfect proposal, you may still not be successful in every application. Ask the funder for an opportunity to learn more about your applications’ strengths and weaknesses (details below). You may discover new strategies or tips that will help you in the future. Funders may even recommend other funding opportunities for you to explore after the meeting.

Applicant Checklist

- Start early and set reminders**
- Use all available support**
- Use the funder’s keywords to share your story and your impact on your community**
- Seek feedback from people who understand what the funder wants to achieve**
- Apply before the deadline**
- Seek opportunities to learn from your mistakes and from any unsuccessful proposals**

Align With the Evaluation Criteria

- Review the rules that explain how applications will be scored so you understand what reviewers are prioritizing.
- Use language from the application itself to show alignment with the requirements and goals.
- Provide specific examples that show how your proposal meets evaluation criteria and community needs.

Participate in Debriefs and Feedback

- Attend debriefs or request feedback to learn how your application was reviewed and scored. If it is not clear that this option is available, please reach out within 48 hours of announced awards.
- Ask clarifying questions so you leave with a clear understanding of what you demonstrated well.
- Use funders’ feedback to strengthen future applications, refine your approach, and build readiness for future opportunities. It helps to save this feedback as a file so you can easily find it for your next attempt.

CONTACT US

For questions about the Community Business Connector (CBC) Game Ready Activation Grants process or to follow up about this report, please reach out to the teams below.



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[View Data Dashboard for Activation Data & Stories](#)

