



Culture, Equity, and the Arts Frequently Asked Questions July 2026

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What is Culture, Equity, and the Arts (CEA)?

Culture, Equity, and the Arts (CEA) aims to contribute to a more equitable arts and culture sector in Chicago by applying inclusive criteria and shifting power outside of philanthropic institutions, relying instead on the advice of community voices in recommending grants to Foundation leadership. Our objective is to achieve a more equitable distribution of MacArthur’s Chicago Commitment resources across the city’s geographies and populations and support a greater variety of organizations.

In August of 2019, we announced the end of MacArthur’s longstanding Arts and Culture in Chicago program and the launch of a new offering in its place called Culture, Equity, and the Arts. The design of the CEA program was informed by [conversations with arts leaders](#), the Chicago Commitment team’s participation in [Enrich Chicago](#), internal research indicating a [lack of grantees headquartered on the South and West sides](#), research and conversations with other funders regarding [participatory grantmaking](#), and by the values articulated in our Foundation-wide [Just Imperative](#).

The former Arts and Culture in Chicago program was described as a “civic contribution to Chicago”; applications were accepted by invitation only, and grant amounts were determined by the size of the organization’s annual operating budget, with larger-budget organizations receiving larger awards.

By contrast, three elements define Culture, Equity, and the Arts:

- 1) *Participatory Grantmaking*: A panel of eight to twelve external individuals make funding recommendations based on a review process led by an independent facilitator.
- 2) *Equity-focused Grantmaking Guidelines*: An independent facilitator worked with Staff to craft grantmaking criteria through a participatory process. Requests for funding are assessed against four organizational characteristics or “attributes”: Equity, Collaboration, Connectivity, and Relevance. These criteria are described below.
- 3) *Grant Award Amounts*: Participatory grantmakers recommend award amounts based on criteria described below.

What does the Culture, Equity, and the Arts program offer?

CEA offers multi-year, general operating support directly to Chicago-based organizations with budgets of \$1 million and above. Grant sizes range from \$55,000 to \$80,000 per year, typically for three years. These resources provide flexible funding that helps organizations maintain stability, plan ahead, pursue new ideas, and invest in new artistic directions.

Who is eligible to apply?

Grantseeking organizations must meet the following eligibility criteria. An eligible organization:

- Has an annual operating budget of \$1 million or greater as demonstrated by a final, independently audited financial statement indicating both revenues and expenses of \$1 million or above in the most recently completed fiscal year;
- Has a mission that aligns with the Chicago Commitment's [strategy](#) and overarching goal;
- Is a nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) status from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in good standing with the IRS and the Illinois Secretary of State; and
- Has a reasonable level of fiscal and organizational health. [View our approach to due diligence.](#)

In addition, the following eligibility criteria are applied:

Geographic Boundaries: Funding in the CEA program is offered to Chicago-based organizations. The program prioritizes requests from organizations that are located within Chicago city limits and whose core mission is to serve Chicago audiences. We will, on occasion, consider requests from organizations that are in the suburbs if the applicant can make a compelling case that the organization reaches audiences within the city of Chicago to a substantial degree and is otherwise closely aligned with the attributes below.

Arts-Centered Organizations: Organizations with a core arts mission are eligible (e.g. theater companies, art museums, dance companies, etc.). In addition, eligible grantseekers include arts-centered organizations where art is integral to executing an organization’s mission but may not be the primary stated activity (e.g. a human services organization in which arts programming is integral to and embedded in its violence prevention work).

University-Affiliated Cultural Institutions: Organizations that are closely affiliated with larger institutions, such as universities and schools; receive significant financial or in-kind support from the larger institution; and are not independent nonprofits with self-governing boards and independent audits, are not eligible.

What if my budget is below \$1 million?

As part of CEA, MacArthur established a regranteeing partnership with the [Field Foundation](#) to offer general operating support to arts and cultural organizations in Chicago with annual budgets up to \$1 million. This partnership, A Road Together (ART), is an initiative of the Field Foundation supported by MacArthur.

View ART funding guidelines and application information: <https://fieldfoundation.org/grantmaking/a-road-together/>

The Field Foundation maintains independent control and supervision of the ART program. Grant decisions in the ART program are made at the discretion of the Field Foundation.

How do grantseekers apply to Culture, Equity, and the Arts?

After carefully reviewing the [grantmaking guidelines](#), all organizations interested in applying must [submit letters of inquiry \(LOI\)](#) when the portal is open. Each year, LOIs are accepted between February 1 and March 31.

This requirement applies to organizations with budgets of \$1 million and above that are seeking renewed awards as well as organizations that are seeking general operating support in the CEA program for the first time.

The LOI should cover topics such as the organization's mission and history and how its work aligns with the attributes in the CEA program described below.

What are the selection criteria?

Requests that meet the eligibility criteria noted above are then considered according to the following selection criteria.

Organizational Attributes:

Equity—the organization demonstrates a commitment to fair treatment, access, and opportunity for all, and the elimination of barriers to participation.

Collaboration—the organization actively works with external partners to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

Connectivity—the organization uses its artistic and cultural practices and programming to inspire empathy and encourage individual empowerment, bridge divides between people and communities, and/or connect to other familiar or unfamiliar perspectives.

Relevance—the organization's creative work illuminates contemporary social inequities.

How are award amounts determined?

Grant sizes are \$55,000 or \$80,000 per year in general operating support. Larger grants are given to organizations that strongly align with CEA's four attributes.

What is the participatory grantmaking process?

Full applications that are invited by Staff are reviewed by a participatory grantmaking panel with eight to twelve members. The panel applies the grantmaking criteria noted above to make funding recommendations with guidance by an independent facilitator. Participatory grantmakers are community members who represent a wide diversity of demographic backgrounds, life experiences, and areas of expertise. The panel decides whether requests meet the criteria outlined above. Staff then present a slate of awards for consideration by MacArthur's President and Board of Directors, which retain final approval authority.

How are LOIs reviewed by Staff?

Staff review LOIs against the eligibility criteria described above. The capacity of the participatory grantmaking panel to review applications is limited. Therefore, MacArthur Staff may narrow the number of applicants for panel review to those who will make the strongest case for funding based on the attributes. This is done in an effort to alleviate the burden of a rigorous application process for those organizations that are not likely to be funded.

Organizations that are invited to submit a full application continue to the participatory grantmaking process.

What if my organization received support in the past?

There is no presumption that past support, either directly or via MacArthur's previous funding partners, will result in a new award. Grantseekers are advised to approach the CEA program as they would any new funding prospect, regardless of previous support.

What is the history of MacArthur's approach to funding the arts and culture sector in Chicago?

In 2003, the Foundation launched regranting partnerships with two foundations, the MacArthur Fund at the Prince Charitable Trusts and the MacArthur Fund at the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, offering general operating support to strengthen and sustain small and mid-sized arts and culture organizations.

Historically, three portfolios were organized by grantee budget size:

- 1) The MacArthur Fund at the Driehaus Foundation regranting MacArthur funds to small organizations with annual budgets below \$500,000;

- 2) The MacArthur Fund at Prince regranted MacArthur funds to mid-sized organizations with budgets between \$500,000 and \$2 million; and
- 3) MacArthur offered general operating support directly to organizations with annual operating budgets of \$2 million and above.

Between 2003 and 2022, MacArthur awarded a total of \$65.6 million to 565 small and mid-sized organizations via these historic partnerships. MacArthur, Prince, and Driehaus mutually and amicably agreed to not continue the funding partnerships beyond the end of 2022. The historic MacArthur funds at Prince and Driehaus ended December 31, 2022.

How can I learn more?

We encourage you to read the following articles on our website:

[Culture, Equity, and the Arts: Accepting the Invitation to Change](#)

[A Work in Progress: Participatory Grantmaking in the Arts](#)

[Listening to and Seeking Guidance from Local Advisors](#)

[Sharing and Shifting Power: Lessons from Participatory Grantmaking](#)

[Building a More Equitable Arts Ecosystem from the Ground Up](#)

[Change for More Equitable Arts in Chicago](#)

[Participatory Grantmaking for the Arts, Six Years On](#)

For more questions, please contact cea@macfound.org.