Guide to Foundation Funding

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The Grants Resource Center (GRC), a unit of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, has provided tools and services to higher education institutions since 1967 to support the grant-seeking activity of administrators, faculty, students, staff, and community and industry partners in all disciplines.

Since its establishment, GRC has used three approaches to increase campus capabilities in research and sponsored programs: distribution of information on federal and private funding opportunities; provision of personal service and promotion of professional development for research and sponsored programs administrators; and development of a searchable funding database that catalogs the private and federal funding opportunities appropriate to higher education.

Over time, the office has added services to support new priorities essential to grants and contracts management, including resources to assist campuses with proliferating grant compliance demands, and advocacy before funders to promote the development of competitive grant applications from a more diverse pool of institutions.

Contact GRC at 202.293.7070 or grchelp@aascu.org for additional information.

GUIDE TO FOUNDATION FUNDING

Grants Resource Center
American Association of State
Colleges and Universities

Contents

Introduction 1
- What Foundations Support 2
- Types of Foundations 3

Identifying Foundations 4
- Exploring the Possibilities 4
- Narrowing the List 6
- Coordinating and Committing 7

Presenting the Idea 8
- Initial Contact 8
- Letter of Inquiry 8
- Formal Proposal 9
- Financial Support 11
- Partnerships 12
- Matching Funds 12
- Indirect Costs 12
- Timing the Submission 13
- Success or Resubmission 14

Proposal and Planning FAQs 15

Resources 20
- General Information 20
- Additional Resources 20
- Grants Listings 21
- Works Consulted 22
- The Foundation Center Cooperating Collections 23

Introduction

Over 75,000 grant-making foundations are currently in operation. Philanthropic giving more than doubled between 1999 and 2010—and on average, 20 percent of that support has been directed toward education institutions for initiatives ranging from capital campaign to program development to research.

The federal government still remains the largest grant-making body in the U.S., but foundations and corporations have become more active players in setting funding agendas in social services, the arts, medical and technological research, health policy, the environment, social issues, and education.

The number of prospective sponsors and the nature of their operations can render foundation grant-seeking a daunting enterprise: each U.S. foundation has a unique philosophy and mission that must be understood prior to the submission of a sound request for support.

Whereas federal agencies operate according to processes determined by congressional mandates and government-wide protocols, foundations enjoy more procedural freedom. The statement of purpose required for a foundation to incorporate itself is often laid out broadly, allowing the organization to evolve, shift priorities, and change policies at its donors' and administrators' will. So the identification of a viable foundation sponsor pool is appropriately considered a moving target.

When potential sources of foundation support are identified, applicants must carefully tailor their

approach to correspond with the foundations' expectations. Studies estimate that as much as 80 percent of all proposals for private funding are inappropriate or misdirected because the applicant hasn't effectively determined a foundation's specific goals and mission. A focused funding search saves time and resources for both the applicant and the prospective funder, as does the effort it takes to understand and comply with the funder's communication preferences.

This guide has been developed to provide practical advice on securing financial commitment from private sources in light of the distinct nature of private funding and the many differences among foundations.

What Foundations Support

Before beginning a search for private sponsors, prospective applicants should confirm that the project is appropriate for foundation support. Despite the diversity of foundations and the projects they fund, several general rules can be used to help an applicant determine whether or not a foundation is the best funding source.

Many foundations prefer to fund special projects, or to provide start-up funding for activities that will become self-sustaining after a short period of time. In addition, foundations seldom support projects that could appropriately be funded through state and federal grants. If a government agency has already established a funding mechanism for a particular type of project, then that should be a grant-seeker's first prospect for funding. But like government agencies, foundations prefer to fund innovative projects that represent novel

approaches to identified social problems or needs. If a project is too imitative or merely an extension of what has already been done, its chances of success are reduced, regardless of the prospective funding type.

Types of Foundations

Within these general guidelines, each type of foundation also has specific funding patterns:

- **Independent Foundations** are established under broad charters that mandate support of social, educational, religious, and other charitable activities. Over 80 percent of all foundations fall within this category, and their giving patterns usually reflect the interests of the organization's founder. Based on the scope of their giving, independent foundations may be further categorized as local or national:
  - **Local Foundations** primarily fund projects that benefit the foundation's immediate local community or region. Seventy percent of giving by independent foundations comes from local foundations.
  - **National Foundations** often develop specific grant and fellowship programs in addition to giving across broad charter areas. National foundations are more willing to take risks to support innovative projects that could have a demonstrable impact and be replicated or adapted in other communities.
- **Company-Sponsored Foundations** are established and organized as entities independent of the parent company, usually with separate boards of directors. These foundations maintain close ties with the company by funding in areas related to corporate

activities. They also fund projects that will improve the communities in which company employees live.

- **Corporate Giving Programs** allow companies to make grants without having to establish a separate foundation. Through these in-house contribution programs, companies make grants directly to organizations.

- **Community/Public Foundations** establish their endowments through contributions from several donors within a given geographic region and focus support on projects that will improve their local districts. Community or public foundations usually do not support research, curriculum development, or other college- or university-focused activities, but they do fund outreach projects that benefit the local community at large.

- **Operating Foundations**, like independent foundations, are supported by endowment income, but they use their resources to conduct in-house research or provide a direct service to the public. They make few, if any, external grants, and these usually supplement the foundation's ongoing, internal programs.

IDENTIFYING FOUNDATIONS

Exploring the Possibilities

Once an applicant has established that a proposed project is appropriate for private support, the research into individual sponsors begins. At this stage, the development of a succinct concept paper aids in the identification of a short list of potential supporters.

The first step is to develop a list of foundations whose funding interests and geographic focus are congruent with the proposed project. The institution's library or grants and sponsored programs office will have copies of foundation directories with subject and geographical indices that can be used to make this initial list. Commonly used directories include the *Foundation Directory Online* (from the Foundation Center), *Foundation Reporter,* and *Corporate Giving Director.* The Taft Group also provides an online, searchable database.

Grant-seekers should confirm the following information about any foundations that seem to be appropriate prospects:

- Do the goals of the project match the foundation's priorities?
- Does the foundation give to institutions of higher education?
- Does the foundation support projects in the appropriate geographic area?
- Does the foundation support the proposed project type (e.g., research, demonstration, curriculum development, service, etc.)?
- Does the foundation provide the type of funding required (e.g., seed money, endowment, construction, research, training, etc.)?
- Is the foundation's grant range and period of support in line with the project's required scope?

It is best to excise questionable funding sources from the list of prospects at this point in order to focus efforts and increase the likelihood of success. While this culling process is time-consuming, it helps to familiarize

potential applicants with the diversity of foundations and may provide insight into sources of funding for future projects.

Narrowing the List

Many foundations describe their funding patterns in broad terms, so prospective applicants should investigate beyond a foundation's promotional materials. Lists of previous grants awarded can be obtained in a foundation's annual report, in publications such as the *Foundation Grants Index* or the *Foundation Reporter,* and, often, on foundations' websites.

Awards lists are a straightforward source of information on the types of projects the foundation has supported, but they can also be useful in identifying unwritten or unofficial funding patterns. For example, a foundation may state that it makes awards on a national basis, while in practice it concentrates giving within a particular region of the U.S. Or a foundation might state that it offers support spanning an entire research discipline, while a review of previous awards shows no support in the applicant's specific field of inquiry. Likewise, a foundation that invites all institutions of higher education to submit letters of interest might in reality limit its awards to certain types of institutions.

When using a database such as the Foundation Center's Foundation Directory Online, it is important to comb grant-makers' profiles for limitations and restrictions on funding, then remove from the list any foundation whose actual funding pattern would not include the applicant project or institution.

Colleagues who have similar professional interests represent another resource for vetting prospective funders. Recent grant recipients in particular may be willing to engage in discussion about their experience in successfully applying for funding. Awardees are under no obligation to share their proposals, and foundations are not subject, as federal agencies are, to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which mandates the disclosure of federal documents, including grant proposal narratives. But success often breeds goodwill, and well-informed potential applicants should cultivate peer-to-peer relationships and consider requesting examples of funded proposals. These should be viewed not as templates, but rather as samples of the type of work viewed as well-organized and convincing by a particular grantmaker.

Coordinating and Committing

Before contacting a foundation, project directors should coordinate their approach with other offices on campus and, depending on the scope of the prospective request, secure institutional commitment from the institution's chief executive officer or other senior administrator. While grant proposals to federal agencies are almost always submitted through the institution's authorized organizational representative (often the director of research or sponsored programs), many institutions route applications to foundations through the development office. Ideally, the sponsored programs and development staffs have a well-established, cooperative relationship for managing requests for external support. This is crucial where foundation grant-seeking is concerned, for multiple concurrent requests can jeopardize the competitiveness of all concerned.

Inter-departmental communication can also be an integral part of obtaining institutional commitment for a project. Most sponsored projects require the allocation of institutional resources, from overhead and equipment to personnel. In order to allocate these resources effectively, the institution needs to be aware of all such demands on its resources.

Foundations review the institution's commitment as well as the structure and objectives of the proposed project; therefore, the absence or presence of interoffice coordination and institutional commitment will have consequences for the funding decision. Potential sponsors consider the absence of coordination to be an indication of potentially poor project management, while coordination and commitment in accord with the project's objectives signal that grant funds will be used appropriately and increase the likelihood that the proposal will be funded.

PRESENTING THE IDEA

Initial Contact

Once prospective applicants have generated a list of potential sponsors and have coordinated with other campus offices, it is imperative to contact the foundation in the manner requested: phone call; letter of inquiry; online form; concept paper; or full proposal, adhering to length and format in all cases.

Letter of Inquiry

Many foundations prefer to review letters of inquiry before requesting full proposals. The writing of a letter of inquiry is often as challenging as the development of

a full proposal, since the components—need, proposed intervention, project design and management, and assessment—must all be compellingly, clearly, and concisely laid out.

Letters of inquiry generally include the following information:

- An introduction that includes details on the institution, project, dollar amount requested, qualifications of staff, methodology, and timetable;
- A statement of need; and
- A description of the institution's or department's ability to meet this need.

Packaging this information in a way that is easily digested in a quick read characterizes an effective letter of inquiry.

Formal Proposal

Proposals must follow the format prescribed in the funding organization's guidelines. If the foundation does not provide formal guidelines, an applicant should remember that reviewers appreciate concise, informative proposals that address the funder's stated priorities.

Foundations are likely to ask these types of questions:

- Will the project make a significant difference?
- Does the project attempt to tackle too much?
- Is the budget request appropriate?
- Is there institutional commitment?
- Is the evaluation plan sound?

Some professional proposal writers suggest opening with a general overview of the applicant organization, including its purpose and aims, then focusing on the project needs and the specific amount of funding requested. Others advise that applicants begin with a statement of need, follow with the project's overall goals and specific objectives, and end with the plan of action. Regardless of the order chosen, proposals should contain the following components:

- A letter or one-page synopsis of the project, stating the purpose, amount requested, and expected duration;
- A description of the applicant institution and the signature of an authorized organizational representative;
- A rationale or needs statement that includes this information:
  - The project's broad goals
  - Measurable objectives to meet the goals
  - Actions that will be taken to achieve the objectives
  - A timeline or schedule for project activities
  - An evaluation plan that is tied to the project plan
- A description of the qualifications of the key personnel;
- Proof of the institution's tax-exempt status, as required by the Internal Revenue Code;
- A budget that includes future funding plans for multi-year projects.

The cover letter must be tailored to show a clear understanding of the foundation's priorities and grant-making patterns. It should avoid the assumption that the funder is familiar with the applicant institution and

project director, and it should recognize past contacts or previous grants received from the foundation.

Financial Support

Funding organizations are placing increasing emphasis on the need to maximize returns on their principal investments in projects, and they often set stipulations on how projects must be administered. Two common requirements are partnering with other organizations and providing matching funds (also known as cost sharing). Unlike most federal agencies, many foundations prohibit applicants from using grant dollars to pay for indirect costs.

Applicants should overtly address these and any other requirements in their proposals. An application for funding—federal, state, or private—is best positioned when it addresses every potential review criterion. This proposal writing practice limits the possibility that reviewers will question the applicant's understanding of the award criteria or make a negative assumption about the applicant's ability to manage a project within the funding parameters. Potential weaknesses should be confronted in the proposal with their solutions explained.

For example, if a foundation encourages partnering with a local community service organization, and an applicant mentions no such partnership, evaluators may identify a deficit in the proposal. If the applicant instead states that no community service organization is in operation within the proposed project region, the fact could serve as further evidence of need for the project and be regarded as a proposal advantage rather than a deficit.

Partnerships

Foundations may require applicants to partner with other institutions, to improve the quality of a project and ensure sufficient expertise, or to bridge the gap between theoretical and applied knowledge. The primary function of any partnership is the development of a realistic and mutually beneficial arrangement. Applicants should clearly demonstrate that all partners are involved in a cooperative and meaningful way. Even if not explicitly required in the foundation's guidelines, an applicant may choose to include a partnership agreement in the appendix of the proposal.

Matching Funds

As partnerships focus on project outcomes, matching funds speak to a project's longevity. Sometimes matching funds take the form of in-kind contributions, or non-cash donations of time, materials, or other resources. If matching funds are required, the applicant will need to identify donors willing to contribute an amount in proportion to the grant-making organization, usually a 1:1 or 1:2 ratio. By requiring more than one party to support a project, foundations increase the parties with a vested interest in seeing the project first completed, then sustained after the award period expires. A letter of commitment to provide the financial match should be included in the appendix of the proposal.

Indirect Costs

Foundations leverage their funds to achieve the greatest possible impact and, in doing so, often conclude that reimbursing indirect costs reduces the number of grants they can award. Few will approve reimbursement of the full, federally-negotiated

facilities and administrative (F&A), or indirect cost, rate. Many foundations consider F&A to be a part of the institution's commitment to the project. When that is the case, an institution might apply its federally-negotiated rate to the proposed budget and then contribute a percentage of those costs as in-kind funds.

Prospective applicants may inquire about such policies directly to a foundation program officer. An institution's sponsored programs or development office may also be familiar with the sponsor's practices. Applicants can choose to include or exclude indirect costs in a letter of inquiry or pre-proposal, and then address the issue fully in the formal application process. No matter how applicants treat indirect costs, they must act with the approval of the institution's administrators. Failure to recover full indirect costs translates to an institutional expense, one that may have an impact on the F&A cost rate at the time of the next federal negotiation.

Timing the Submission

Grant decisions are often tied to foundation board meetings, which can be held as infrequently as once or twice a year. Foundations often need to receive applications two to three months in advance of board meetings to allow time for review and investigation. Most published descriptions of foundations list the times and/or frequency of board meetings, and proposals should be submitted with the board meeting, or review committee meeting, schedule in mind.

Once a proposal is submitted, applicants may call or e-mail the foundation to verify that their application was received and to alert the foundation to any material changes in the proposed project. The foundation may

request additional information from applicants during the review process.

Success or Resubmission

When receiving word that a proposal has been approved for funding, it is necessary to notify the appropriate offices at the home institution so that all administrative requirements can be met before beginning work. Also, the successful applicant should take steps to maintain a relationship with the foundation, even if there are no formal requirements to do so. It is important to follow up with a thank you letter and to keep the foundation updated on the progress of the project.

When a proposal is declined, the applicant should consider the potential for revising and resubmitting. The resubmission process begins with identifying reasons the proposal was not funded and asking for suggestions on how to improve the presentation of ideas in the revised proposal. Requesting a written list of suggestions, discussing the proposal with foundation staff, and meeting with a foundation representative are also advisable strategies in the revision process.

The size of the foundation will determine the extent of the debriefing one can expect; any information received will inform the decisions about whether to revise and resubmit. It can be helpful to e-mail a foundation representative with questions ahead of time, to give time to prepare for a follow-up phone call or meeting.

Award veterans indicate that revision and resubmission are frequently the keys to success. Applicants should remember that their chances for success in the search

for private funding will be enhanced if they start the search before they actually need the support. They should research their potential sponsors thoroughly, develop concise and informative letters of inquiry and proposals, and allow enough time for the submission of a revised proposal.

PROPOSAL AND PLANNING FAQs

- Do I have to do my homework before contacting a foundation?
- What's the best way to approach a foundation?
- My proposal is pending. Can I call the grant-maker to request a status update or to share further information/materials?
- Can I contact one of the foundation's board members?
- My proposal wasn't funded. Can I speak with the foundation about why?
- What's the best thing to do if my proposal is rejected?
- If a grant is awarded, what's the best thing for me to do?
- Beyond basic info, what should my proposal contain?
- What will make my proposal stand out?
- What should go in my appendix?
- What do grant-makers look for in their review of grant proposals?
- Do grant-makers meet with prospective grantees?
- What should my priorities be when applying for a grant from a foundation?

■ **Do I have to do my homework before contacting a foundation?**

- Yes! Do not contact a foundation before reading through its guidelines, and any available FAQs, carefully. Proposal-writing workshops are alsoconsidered very useful for first timers, and funders will appreciate your effort. If you contact a foundation without thinking through your questions or concerns, you will risk seeming unprepared or careless, and potentially frustrate the foundation.

■ **What's the best way to approach a foundation?**

- Many foundations prescribe their preferred form of initial contact, and it is best use the requested method. Phone calls should be limited to five or 10 minutes, and should be initiated well in advance of a deadline, when the representative will have the most time available. If e-mailing, make every effort to identify a specific recipient, rather than a bulk account.

■ **My proposal is pending. Can I call the grant-maker to request a status update or to share further information/materials?**

- If you have updated materials to share, submit them by mail or e-mail according to the foundation's guidelines. Checking in on the status of an application is acceptable, but it is advisable to gather all available information on the review schedule and policies.

■ **Can I contact one of the foundation's board members?**

- If you already have an established relationship with a foundation's board member, contacting them about your proposal is considered appropriate. In other circumstances, though, tread carefully. Every foundation is different; some may have board members serving as program officers, others may have established rules prohibiting board members from advocating for certain proposals.

■ **My proposal wasn't funded. Can I speak with the foundation about why?**

- When applicants request information on why their proposal wasn't funded, foundation representatives are often willing to provide it. The call or e-mail should not be an attempt to garner reconsideration, but rather an effort to gather insight into the review process and factors that could lead to a successful resubmission.

■ **What's the best thing to do if my proposal gets rejected?**

- Have some questions ready for the program officer before you try to contact them via phone or e-mail, and send acknowledgment or a thank-you letter for considering your request. Remember that the declination does not have to be the end of your relationship with the foundation. If possible, schedule a face-to-face meeting to discuss the declination. Handling this process with professionalism will earn you further respect from the foundation.

■ **If a grant is awarded, what's the best thing for me to do?**

- Send your thanks! Keep foundation representatives up-to-date on your progress, meet all reporting requirements, and invite them to activities related to your project. Don't forget to respond quickly and cash the check – delays may make the foundation wonder if you really need the money.

■ **Beyond basic info, what should my proposal contain?**

- Include details about the sustainability of the project and the risks of implementing it. Being honest will show the funder that you are realistic and grounded. Articulate the long-term, systemic change that your project is likely to achieve in a manner that is clear, compelling, and personalized. Be straightforward and detailed in your timeline and budget. If you can show evidence of local support, do so.

■ **What will make my proposal stand out?**

- Many grant-makers express how much they appreciate receiving proposals early. Make certain your proposal's goals are clearly described. Avoid hyperbole, but express your enthusiasm. A well-written and engaging read will speak volumes.

■ **What should go in my appendix?**

- Let the foundation know if your board has contributed to the project, or is willing to do so. Describe previous support. Use organizational charts, and include a list of the key positions associated with the project.

■ **What do grant-makers look for in their review of grant proposals?**

- Try to keep in mind these indicators that foundations will be looking for:
- Does the project align with the foundation's interests? Is there a solid relationship between the two?
- Is the project viable? Will there be an exit strategy for the foundation?
- Could this increase the impact of the foundation's other previous grants?
- Is there evidence of collaboration? Financial strength of the institution?
- What impact will this grant have on the community?
- What percentage of the project is the foundation being asked to fund?

■ **Do grant-makers meet with prospective grantees?**

A face-to-face meeting may be of interest to the foundation. Make sure your conversation builds on your proposal, and be prepared to answer questions. Treat the meeting as you would a job interview by researching the foundation, contacting institutions the foundation has previously funded, and providing materials that may move the conversation forward. Also, let the foundation know what they can expect from your meeting in advance.

■ **What should my priorities be when applying for a grant from a foundation?**

- Try to develop a relationship with the foundation before you send your proposal.
- Have your eye toward the future, and be as innovative as possible.

- Treat the program officer with respect and use his or her time wisely.
- Have confidence in your proposal and its capacity to advance the foundation's mission.

RESOURCES

General Information

The Foundation Center, a national nonprofit clearinghouse for information on foundations, is an essential resource. It issues a wide variety of print, electronic, and online information resources; conducts and publishes research on trends in foundation growth, giving, and practice; and offers an array of free or low-cost educational programs, with the goal of advancing knowledge of philanthropy: http://www.foundationcenter.org

The Taft Group also publishes reference works for members of the nonprofit sector. Like The Foundation Center, it maintains an extensive database of individual, corporate, and foundation giving information:

Additional Resources

- Philanthropy News Digest is a free service of the Foundation Center, providing news, requests for proposals, and job opportunities: http://foundationcenter.org/pnd/
- The Council on Foundations is comprised of over 2,100 grantmaking organizations. Its website is a good resource for gaining insight into the concerns and priorities of foundations: http://www.cof.org
- The Forum of Regional Associations of Grant-makers

is the national-level collaboration of 33 regional associations. These associations are groups of local grant-makers that work together to increase the effectiveness of private philanthropy in their regions: http://www.givingforum.org
- Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support (WINGS) is a global network of more than 140 membership associations and support organizations serving grant-makers with an eye on global philanthropy: http://www.wingsweb.org
- FoundationSearch America is a North American source of fundraising information for nonprofit organizations and charities, including more than 120,000 foundations: http://www.foundationsearch.com
- The Chronicle of Philanthropy provides news and information for nonprofit leaders, fund raisers, grant-makers, and other people involved in the philanthropic enterprise: http://philanthropy.com

Grants Listings

- *Foundation Giving Watch* is a monthly publication for nonprofit organizations. The report is divided into five sections and includes profiles and analyses of foundations; updates on foundations' contact information, personnel, and operations; and other significant funding news. Available from the Taft Group for $149 per year.
- *Grants on Disc* contains more than 370,000 grant profiles. Each entry includes the funder or recipient name, grant amount, and year. Searching is available by funder, recipient, or other items within a grant listing. Available from the Taft Group for $695.
- *The Chronicle Guide to Grants* is a comprehensive and searchable computer listing of new corporate

and foundation grants published bimonthly. Subscriptions cost $395 for the CD-ROM edition and $295 for 3.5" diskettes, for use with IBM-compatible computers. Available from the Chronicle of Higher Education.

- *The Foundation Grants Index* provides information on recent grant-maker awards to provide the best indication of a foundation's future funding priorities. It includes over 73,000 grant descriptions and may be obtained from The Foundation Center for $165. Quarterly updates are available for $95 annually.
- *Who Gets Grants: Foundation Grants to Nonprofit Organizations* helps distinguish which foundations are funding other nonprofit organizations. The list includes grant descriptions, amounts, grant-makers, and recipients. Available from the Foundation Center for $135.

Works Consulted

- Hicks, Jown W. Proposal Writing Seminar. Washington, DC: Foundation Center. 2010.
- Geever, Jane C. *Guide to Proposal Writing*. New York: The Foundation Center. 5th ed. 2007.
- The Council on Foundations. 6/30/2010. http://www.cof.org.
- The Chronicle of Philanthropy. 7/1/2010. http://philanthropy.com.

The Foundation Center Cooperating Collections

These collections consist of libraries, community foundations, and other nonprofit agencies providing a core collection of Foundation Center publications and a variety of supplementary materials and services for grant-seekers. Most of the network members provide tax returns (IRS Form 990-PF) from their states or regions for public use. A complete set of U.S. foundation returns are available at Foundation Center offices across the country and online at http://foundationcenter.org/collections/.

Guide to Foundation Funding was prepared by Grants Resource Center staff members Rachel Malis, Megan Cantwell and Linda Anthony.

Delivering America's Promise

AASCU's membership of 430 public colleges and universities is found throughout the United States, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. We range in size from 1,000 students to 44,000. We are found in the inner city, in suburbs, towns and cities, and in remote rural America. We include campuses with extensive offerings in law, medicine and doctoral education—as well as campuses offering associate degrees to complement baccalaureate studies. We are both residential and commuter, and offer on-line degrees as well. Yet common to virtually every member institution are three qualities that define its work and characterize our common commitments.

- We are institutions of access and opportunity. We believe that the American promise should be real for all Americans, and that belief shapes our commitment to access, affordability and educational opportunity, and in the process strengthens American democracy for all citizens.
- We are student-centered institutions. We place the student at the heart of our enterprise, enhancing the learning environment and student achievement not only through teaching and advising, but also through our research and public service activities.
- We are "stewards of place." We engage faculty, staff and students with the communities and regions we serve—helping to advance public education, economic development and the quality of life for all with whom we live and who support our work. We affirm that America's promise extends not only to those who come to the campus but to all our neighbors.

We believe that through this stewardship and through our commitments to access and opportunity and to our students, public colleges and universities effectively and accountably deliver America's promise. In so doing we honor and fulfill the public trust.

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