

# Key Findings and Recommendations from the ECMC Foundation 2023 Grantee and Applicant Perception Report

Prepared by the Center for Effective Philanthropy

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*In February and March of 2023, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) surveyed ECMC Foundation’s (“ECMC” or “the Foundation”) grantees and declined applicants. The memo below outlines the key findings and recommendations from ECMC’s Grantee and Applicant Perception Report (GPR/APR). ECMC’s grantee and declined applicants’ perceptions should be interpreted in light of the Foundation’s goals, strategy, and context.*

*This memo accompanies the comprehensive survey results from 135 grantees (a 58 percent response rate) and 48 applicants (a 33 percent response rate) found in ECMC’s interactive online report at <https://cep.surveymethods.org> and in the downloadable online materials, including respondents’ written comments. ECMC’s online report also contains more information about the survey methodology and subgroup analysis.*

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## Overview and Context

- ▶ This is the third Grantee Perception Report – the second including declined applicants – for ECMC Foundation. CEP conducted this recent survey after the announcement of ECMC’s strategic transition, and most grantees and declined applicants are aware of that change. Even in this moment of transition, across the topics of grantee experience and perception, ratings largely remained steadily high relative to other funders, with only a small handful of measures significantly declining since 2021. Declined applicant ratings also generally remain higher than at most other funders.
- ▶ Throughout the report, grantees and applicants highlight ECMC’s strength as a leader in the education field and encourage the Foundation to further expand its leadership. In one grantee’s words, reflecting others, “ECMC is a leader in the field of post-secondary attainment. Considering the Foundation’s relatively short history, this is no small achievement.... As the Foundation enters its next phase and builds on its work to date, ECMC is likely to play an even bigger role in shaping both policy and practice in the post-secondary field.”
- ▶ Grantee and applicants’ feedback suggest a few areas for the Foundation to improve further, including opportunities to communicate potential implications of the strategy change, more conversations with grantees and applicants that can promote thought partnership, as well as ways to streamline grant processes, particularly after the LOI development stage.

## Continued Partnership During Strategic Transition

- ▶ The majority of grantees (96 percent) and declined applicants (61 percent) are aware of the strategic transition at the Foundation.
- ▶ Grantees and applicants moderately agree that the changes were communicated clearly and that ECMC’s funding priorities are clearer now.
- ▶ In fact, grantees and applicants both now provide ratings for ECMC’s clarity of communication of its goals and strategies that are near the top of CEP’s comparative dataset – a significant

increase for grantees since 2021. (While the transparency of communication remains higher than typical, grantee and applicants' ratings on that measure did trend down.)

### Lingering Questions About the Implications of the Strategy Change on Organizations

- ▶ Grantees and applicants are curious about the impact of ECMC's strategic change on their organizations, and less than half of grantees and applicants agree (rating between 5 and 7 on a seven-point scale) that the new plan has had a positive effect on their organizations.
  - These views on the new plan's impact may be driven by remaining questions about how the changes will affect future relationships with ECMC. When given an opportunity to provide written comments about the plan, nearly half of grantees ask about how the strategic change will affect their current work or how their organizations will fit under the new framework.
- ▶ Besides potential implications of the transition on them, grantees and applicants are also interested in learning more about the new strategy in general.
  - Grantees still have questions about the details of the new framework. For example, grantees want to know how specific focus and populations (e.g., mental health) fit into ECMC's new strategy, and they commonly ask ECMC to provide more information about the Foundation's current goals, strategies, and approaches.
- ▶ Grantees who heard about the strategic change through conversations with someone at the Foundation rate significantly higher for ECMC's clarity of communication on its goals, as well as their perceptions of ECMC's understanding of the contextual factors that affect *grantees'* work. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common preference about how to learn more about changes is to have conversations with a program officer or other staff members. Other grantees suggest further email or webinar content, often in conjunction with conversations.
  - Similarly, applicants who also had conversations with someone at the Foundation about the strategic change rate significantly higher for ECMC's clarity of communication on its goals, overall transparency, and agreement that the Foundation is a stronger catalyst for change in the community.



*“The strategic framework is great, and I understand it. I think with the leadership change, it will be good to have more communication coming up and confirmation that the strategy will generally be the same going forward. While everything is clear, it is good to over communicate, to get the message through.” – Grantee*

### Steady, Positive Perceptions of DEI-rooted Impact, with Opportunities to Augment ECMC's Role as a Leader in the Field

- ▶ In 2023, grantees and applicants continue to rate similarly to ratings in 2021 for the Foundation's impact on and understanding of their fields – ratings that are often higher than other funders. Grantees also continue to provide steady, higher than typical, ratings for the extent that ECMC Foundation advanced the state of knowledge in their fields.
- ▶ Aspects of DEI are a related strength. The large majority of grantees indicate that their grants are primarily meant to benefit historically disadvantaged groups, and 94 percent of grantees agree – often very strongly – that, as a result of ECMC Foundation's funding, they are able to

contribute significantly to the ability of historically underrepresented populations to be successful in post-secondary education.

- ▶ Likewise, grantees and applicants agree more strongly than typical that ECMC Foundation demonstrates an explicit commitment to DEI as both an organization and across staff interactions.
- ▶ When asked what the most important roles are that the Foundation can play beyond grantmaking, grantees most commonly think the Foundation should connect people and organizations doing similar or complementary work, or push forward knowledge in the field.
  - About 15 percent of grantees' written suggestions also touch on this theme, encouraging the Foundation to foster collaboration among grantees and create opportunities for grantees and other funders to connect with each other.



*“The Foundation’s commitment to improving higher education for career success among underserved populations positively influences the college and career access field and helps break down barriers to access.” – Grantee*



*“When ECMC and other funders create or refine their strategic priorities, they are really at the steering wheel for what programs are implemented, what research is conducted, and which policies are advanced.” – Grantee*

## **Strong Thought Partnership with Grantees and Opportunity to Improve Responsiveness**

- ▶ ECMC’s impact on and understanding of grantee organizations remain in line with the typical funder from both CEP’s full dataset and its specific smaller cohort of education-focused funders.
- ▶ Similar to the other education funders in its cohort, the Foundation gives large, multi-year grants. ECMC grantees who receive grants larger than \$500K, or grants that are multi-year, rate significantly higher on the Foundation’s impact on their organizations.
  - Even though ECMC’s average grant length has increased to 2.5 years, 20 percent of grantees’ comments continue to suggest more multi-year or unrestricted funding, as well as grants designated for program or research evaluation. (Only about six percent of ECMC’s funding is unrestricted, a much lower than typical proportion.)
- ▶ Ratings for grantees’ comfort approaching ECMC and the Foundation’s exhibit of trust, respect, and compassion all remain higher than typical. Additionally, ECMC is seen as a thought partner in grantees’ work. In an open-ended question, 87 percent of grantees consider ECMC as a thought partner in some way, and those that do rate significantly higher on ECMC’s understanding of their organizations, its awareness of their challenges, and grantees’ understanding of how their funded work fits into ECMC’s broader efforts.
  - There were a few suggestions about what ECMC can do to enhance its role as a thought partner. For example, some grantees suggest the Foundation “take a more community-based, participatory approach” and stay connected with them for mutual learning after funding.

- ▶ In contrast, grantees’ ratings of ECMC staff’s responsiveness significantly declined in 2023, and the extent to which ECMC exhibits candor and openness to grantee ideas slightly declined. To change this, ECMC may want to look at the pattern of its interactions with grantees.
  - A significantly higher proportion of grantees than in 2021 (39 percent in 2023), experienced a recent change in their ECMC primary contact, and those who experienced a change rate significantly lower on many key measures in the survey, including ECMC’s understanding of grantee organizations, reviews of non-monetary support received, funder-grantee relationships, and grant processes.
  - Additionally, a larger proportion than in 2021 (29 percent in 2023) initiate most contact with ECMC as opposed to a more balanced pattern of initiation of interaction. These grantees also rate significantly lower on the same key measures as above.
- ▶ Twelve percent of grantees’ suggestions for improvement relate to the ways ECMC can further engage with grantees, through more regular check-ins to offer thought partnership and provide candid feedback about grantees’ work.



*“Appreciated that whenever we have talked with staff and/or our program officer that the interactions have been straightforward and helpful. Staff/program officers are professional, kind, thoughtful, and good partners. Communication has been great, and we honestly have nothing but positive things to say about the experience.” – Grantee*

## Helpful But Intensive Grant Processes for Grantee Organizations

- ▶ Grantees and applicants both rate highly for the helpfulness of the review process (a significant improvement from 2021 for applicants) and now place the Foundation in the top quarter of CEP’s datasets.
- ▶ Applicants report lower than typical pressure felt when developing their LOI, while grantees – similar to past results – report higher than typical pressure during the grant proposal stage.
  - Grantees who report high pressure – rating 3 or higher on a seven-point scale – rate significantly lower on many key measures, including ECMC’s impacts on grantees’ fields and organizations, funder-grantee relationships, and grant processes.

## Opportunities to Streamline Processes and Reduce Time Required to Fulfill Requirements

- ▶ Given its large median grant size, the monetary return is very high on the 50 or so hours grantees typically spend on the grantmaking process, at \$9K per process hour. (This higher-than-typical return and higher-than-typical time spent on processes are in line with education funders in ECMC Foundation’s cohort.)
  - Despite this high return, grantees provide ratings in the bottom quarter of CEP’s dataset for whether the level of effort during the review process is appropriate given the amount of funding received. Ratings are also trending down on a question about how easy ECMC’s LOIs, proposals, and reports are when compared to other funders.
  - This may be related to a broader trend in the field toward streamlining. Time spent on ECMC’s processes has not changed since 2021, compared to a decrease in hours noted at many foundations.

- ▶ Close to a quarter of grantees’ comments relate to grant processes, including ways to streamline and clarify expectations. One grantee notes, “Our grant went through...too many reviewers with ideas that the intent of the grant shifted and making it much harder to implement.” Another grantee suggests the Foundation revise reporting forms because they currently “spend time parsing out what [they’ve] done into the different questions so as not to just duplicate what [they’ve] said before.”



*“The grant proposal and review process are much more involved...than any other grant we write. While we appreciate the hands-on support, it would be helpful if there were clearer expectations set up front.... It would be helpful to have more generalized funding within a particular program area rather than having to spell out such detailed outcomes that almost always change over the duration of the grant.” – Grantee*

## Strong Appetite from Applicants for More Interactions During LOI Development

- ▶ In 2023, declined applicants rate their relationships with the Foundation quite positively, providing higher than typical ratings for ECMC’s understanding of their organization, awareness of their challenges, and how responsive, fair, and accessible it is to applicants.
- ▶ The majority of applicants (83 percent) received some reason for their LOI declination, and they continue to give higher than typical ratings for the honesty of ECMC’s reason when declining to fund their LOI.
- ▶ Thirty-nine percent of applicants, a typical proportion but higher than in 2021, received feedback from ECMC after their LOIs were declined. Those who did receive feedback find it to be more helpful than typical in strengthening future LOIs to ECMC and other funders.
  - Applicants who received feedback from ECMC also rate significantly higher on how fairly they feel treated, ECMC’s honesty of declination reason, and the helpfulness of the review process.
- ▶ Although the feedback is helpful, 45 percent of applicants – a lower than typical proportion – received no indication about whether they should apply in the future.
  - Those who received guidance one way or the other rate significantly higher on ECMC’s responsiveness, fairness, and clarity and consistency of its communication to applicants.
- ▶ One important factor in applicants’ experience is whether they had contact with ECMC before applying. Just over half of applicants did so, and they rated significantly higher on how fairly they feel treated, the honesty of reason given when declining the LOI, and ECMC’s transparency in communication.
  - In written comments, applicants ask for more touchpoints with the Foundation, with half of the suggestions relating to ways for program officers to provide candid feedback and clarify funding guidelines during the review process.
- ▶ One possible purpose of greater clarity with applicants could be to encourage the applicants who are most likely to be a successful fit for the Foundation’s approaches. In general, the Foundation continues to partner with large grantees. The median organizational budget of grantees is \$5M, and grantees typically receive about \$500K in grant dollars. In contrast,

declined applicants tend to be requesting about \$100K and are often smaller, with close to one-third of applicants having an operating budget that is less than \$1M (compared to only 12 percent of grantees).



*“We greatly appreciated that the program officer reached out to us to learn more about our work after the LOI was declined.... We were encouraged to stay in touch and to reach out after the Foundation completed its strategic plan process. We have done so, reaching out to share a few updates. Very recently, we asked a direct question about how we might best pursue funding again. The program officer has not responded to these subsequent emails.” – Declined Applicant*

## CEP Recommendations

Based on its grantee and applicant feedback, CEP recommends that ECMC Foundation consider the following in order to build on its strengths and address potential opportunities.

- ▶ Continue to embrace the role of a philanthropic leader in the postsecondary field. Host events to bring stakeholders together and organize collective efforts to further advance knowledge in the field.
- ▶ As the Foundation proceeds with its strategic transition, create more opportunities for program officers to clarify the Foundation’s new goals and how grantees and applicants fit in the new vision during one-on-one conversations.
- ▶ Have clear and candid conversations with grantees and applicants who may not align with the Foundation’s funding priorities. For grantees, provide candid feedback and opportunities for thought partnerships on their work to further develop relationships. For declined applicants, provide guidance to more organizations on whether they should apply again in the future and communicate clearly whether their LOIs are a good fit for the Foundation – both in content and in magnitude.
- ▶ To deepen relationships beyond the grant, revisit communication practices to reinforce routine touchpoints with grantees and applicants. If contact changes occur within the Foundation, find better ways to maintain continuity with grantees.
- ▶ Explore opportunities to streamline the grant review stage to reduce the amount of time and effort put into the process.

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