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FoodDignity

Practice Brief 1

Minigrants: lessons from the literature

On average, minigrant initiatives reviewed here:

- Funded 55% of applications submitted.
- Supported 93 projects.
- Gave \$2,700 per project.
- Reached most of their goals.

Promising practices:

- Fund citizen applications, not just agencies.
- Hire community members to recruit and support applicants.

www.fooddignity.org

This brief summarizes practices and lessons from eight minigrant initiatives aiming to improve community well-being and describes Food Dignity's minigrant plans.

Minigrant Initiative Goals

Many funders offer small grants (also known as minigrants or microgrants) to inspire community engagement, action and change. Goals include:

- *Increasing collaboration* between people or agencies (e.g., between university students and community members).
- *Generating action* in particular arenas (e.g., promoting Healthy People 2010 objectives, creating new community gardens).
- *Distributing decision making power* (and labor).
- *Expanding participation*, engaging non-traditional participants (e.g., “ordinary” citizens, people who have never applied for a grant).

Application Process

Completed application forms were 2-5 pages long, usually available in English and Spanish. Application forms tended to ask for:

- Goals and action plan
- Budget
- Information about the partners

Review and selection was by committee. Committee make-up ranged from neighborhood representatives to external panels of professionals. Some met twice a year, others, especially those offering smaller grants, met one or even twice a month. On average, they funded 93 projects (range: 5-205), representing about 55% of applications (range: 36-72%).

Eligibility was usually restricted to agencies, but two of the initiatives were available to individuals as well.

Award amounts ranged from \$500-10,000, with an average of \$2,700.

Challenges

Issues these minigrant initiatives reported were:

- Trouble recruiting applicants.
- Identifying fair decision-making strategies for awards.
- Amounts not enough to compensate people's time – for action, administration, or serving on review panels.
- Dispersing funding in a timely manner.
- Evaluation burden on grantees.
- Sustaining action after minigrant term ended.

Successes

Achievements reported included:

- Generating immediate and visible action. E.g., one 6-year initiative spurred 306 community change actions, 60% of which were sustained (Collie-Akers et al 2009). In another, 46 of 48 grantees met their goals (Caperchione et al 2010).
- Enhancing planning and action capacity among grantees.
- Expanding community and agency collaboration, including recruiting new “players” to the table. For many, this was their first grant.
- Leveraging significant additional resources.
- Increasing visibility of program goals.



Above- Spinach grown by a Head Start class in Tompkins County, NY (2009). They started the garden with a \$500 state minigrant. Now several other classes also have gardens.

Below-Jhakeem Haltom at the Congo Square Market in Ithaca, NY that he founded in 2009 with a \$3000 minigrant.



Promising Practices

Based on these 8 initiatives and on the Food Dignity team’s research and practice experience to date, minigrants stimulate action and expand community control over that action, particularly if they are:

- *Available to citizens*, not just agencies.
- *Supported* by “animators”, “catalyzers”, or “connectors” from the eligible communities, to recruit and assist applicants.

Minigrants in Food Dignity

The five Food Dignity community partners (see www.fooddignity.org) will each be disseminating \$30,000 in minigrants between 2012 and 2015 to support citizen solutions for fostering sustainable community food systems that build food security. Community steering committees are determining their application and tracking processes. They might, for example, accept oral applications. The minigrants will be available to citizens, including steering committee members. “Animators” will assist in applications, planning, and evaluation. The Food Dignity team is currently designing the evaluation, including to identify:

- Best practices for the application and support processes to reach applicants’ goals and minimize administrative burden.
- Economic, cultural, and social outcomes of the minigrant initiatives.

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