

PIFA Application Info Session

August 05, 2026

Overview

Krista Schnell led the Pay It Forward Accelerator Information Session, detailing the application process and program goals. The program, open to both GMS alumni and non-GMS alumni with a GMS endorsement, focuses on personal and professional development, economic empowerment, and civic engagement. Last year, six changemakers were funded, raising \$65,000. The application deadline is August 21, with finalists announced on September 18. Projects must be based in the U.S. and align with the three pillars. The evaluation process includes a structured review and community voting. Nate Ramos and Kyla Stewart shared their experiences and advice for applicants.

Outline

Introduction and Overview of the Pay It Forward Accelerator (0:00)

- Krista Schnell welcomes everyone to the Pay It Forward Accelerator Information Session webinar and introduces herself and Noah Morton, the incoming program manager.
- Krista provides a brief history of the Pay It Forward Accelerator, mentioning its inception a year ago and the improvements made for this year.
- Noah Morton introduces himself, expressing his excitement about getting to know the project stories and working with the team.
- Krista and Noah discuss the structure of the meeting, including an overview of SEN, the application process, and a Q&A session.

Introduction to Scholars Equity Network (SEN) (3:40)

- Krista explains the mission of Scholars Equity Network (SEN), which aims to activate a network of leaders who refuse to leave barriers in place for the next generation.
- SEN was largely founded by Gates Millennium Scholars alumni who received full scholarships and are now paying it forward.
- The Pay It Forward Accelerator is open to both GMS alumni and non-GMS alumni, provided they have a GMS alum to endorse them.
- The three pillars of SEN are personal and professional development, economic empowerment, and civic engagement.

Details of the Pay It Forward Accelerator Program (6:44)

- Krista provides an overview of the Pay It Forward Accelerator, emphasizing its goal to celebrate changemakers and provide mentorship and hands-on leadership experience.
- The program uses a two-phase evaluation model: an application phase followed by a structured review process with at least three reviewers.

- Finalists will move to a community voting and fundraising stage, where projects will not disclose their budget but will keep 100% of the funds raised plus 30% of any surplus.
- The program aims to provide funding and mentorship, with a focus on investing in the changemakers and their projects.

Application Process and Evaluation Criteria (9:00)

- Krista outlines the application timeline, including the application deadline of August 21, phase one evaluations starting in September, and voting and fundraising starting in October.
- The application requires a project description, community need and innovation, reach and resource efficiency, sustainability and repeatability, and applicant fit and leadership commitment.
- A sample application is provided, based on an excellent application received last year, to help applicants understand the process.
- The evaluation criteria align with the questions in the application, ensuring a comprehensive review of each project.

Q&A Session and Changemaker Introductions (21:28)

- Krista opens the floor for questions, addressing queries about project eligibility, budget considerations, and the impact of project size on acceptance.
- Nate Ramos and Kyla Stewart, current change makers, introduce themselves and their projects, sharing their motivations, challenges, and advice for applicants.
- Nate discusses his project on literacy and sensory issues, highlighting the challenges of working in a new area and the importance of passion in the application.
- Kyla talks about her project, the Devco Dance Initiative, which provides wellness programming for adults who have experienced family separation, and shares her inspiration and lessons learned.

Discussion on Project Fit and Final Questions (39:44)

- A participant asks for advice on choosing between two project ideas: Bilingual Nation and Youth Congress.
- Krista and the group discuss the differences between political and civic engagement, with a consensus that the Youth Congress project aligns more closely with civic engagement.
- Kevin shares his experience with bilingual community education, emphasizing the importance of grassroots promotion and the challenges of reaching Spanish speakers.
- Krista clarifies the eligibility requirements for international projects, confirming that projects must be based in the U.S.

Closing Remarks and Encouragement (50:00)

- Krista thanks everyone for attending and participating in the Q&A session, expressing appreciation for the questions and engagement.
- Nate and Kyla share final words of encouragement, emphasizing the importance of passion and meaningful impact in the application process.
- Krista reiterates the importance of the application overview document and the Google form for submitting applications.
- The meeting concludes with a reminder to reach out with any further questions and a promise to share the recording with those who registered.