



Participatory Capacity Building: Centering Immigrant Leaders' Lived Experience in Their Community of Practice

Executive Summary

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I. Introduction

This report¹ examines a Community of Practice, which is a capacity building opportunity implemented by the Scattergood Foundation and their grantee organizations and is an example of peer-based capacity building.² The Community Fund for Immigrant Wellness (hereafter the Fund) is one of the signature participatory funds³ managed by the Foundation and its partners. The Fund addresses the emotional wellbeing of immigrant and refugee (hereafter immigrant⁴) communities by providing financial support and capacity building to immigrant-serving organizations in the Philadelphia region. As a component of the capacity building, the Fund invites its grantee organizations to join the Community of Practice,⁵ a series of virtual peer-learning opportunities for nonprofit leaders, the majority of whom are immigrants themselves.

“ We need more of this...it's not you [the funder] and us [the grantees].

It's, let's grow.

Let's help you grow together.”

– Community of Practice Participant

The Community of Practice for the grant cycle 2023-24 engaged representatives from eleven nonprofit organizations.⁶ The sessions were facilitated by an outside consultant in English with simultaneous Spanish interpretation.⁷ The sessions addressed themes including Organizational Wellness, Healing and Resilience as Outcomes, Building Community Trust and Power, and Cultural Competency.

II. Research Questions and Methodology

The study addressed the following research questions;

- What key promising elements emerge from the Fund's Community of Practice, and what challenges surface in its implementation?
- How do the interactions facilitated by this participatory⁸ approach to capacity building contribute to shifts in power dynamics between the funder and the grantees?

The following set of qualitative data was collected from the fall of 2023 through the spring of 2024:

- Observations of five virtual Community of Practice sessions
- Four key informant interviews
- One voluntary virtual focus group with six Community of Practice participants
- Supplemental background documents, including grant proposals by the grantee organizations, and the descriptions of the Fund and the Foundation on their website

N Vivo, a software for qualitative data analysis, was used for coding and thematic data analysis.

III. Key Findings

A. Promising Participatory Practices - Three Elements

Three core elements were identified as promising practices of the Fund's Community of Practice: (1) fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and ownership, (2) facilitating asset-based inquiry and the sharing of lived experiences, and (3) encouraging critical reflection and dialogue among members.

1. Fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and ownership

- **Who facilitates matters.**

Creating an environment that fosters a sense of safety, belonging, and ownership can play a significant role in developing trust within the Community of Practice. In this sense, the effectiveness of a facilitator in promoting these elements is crucial. The Fund invited a local bilingual consultant who grew up in an immigrant community and has experience with trauma-informed practices. Her lived experience as well as her sensitivity for group interactions contributed to creating a sense of safety for the group.

- **Who is at the center matters.**

The Community of Practice fosters a sense of ownership by positioning immigrant nonprofit leaders and their experiences at the center. Rather than solely prioritizing the funders' requirements and the grantee organizations' obligations to fulfill them, the facilitator focused on meeting the participants where they were. The Community of Practice provided a valuable space for grantee organizations to engage directly with their peers. Sharing their common identities, experiences and roles as immigrant-led nonprofit leaders helped nurture a sense of belonging.

"I see color when I come into the [virtual] room. When I saw that folks [who] look like me and they have a background of what we're doing, when I hear peers and I see myself there, then I'm in! So that automatically was like, okay, I want to hear from you. I want to hear from my peers."

– Community of Practice Participant

2. Facilitating asset-based inquiry and sharing lived-experiences

- **Asset-based¹⁰ inquiries generate meaningful peer-exchange among nonprofit leaders.**

Rather than instilling technical information and skills, the facilitator employed asset-based inquiry, allowing participants to share their knowledge drawn from their lived experiences and day-to-day practices in serving immigrant clients. The open-ended questions such as the following facilitated meaningful peer-learning opportunities.

- What has been a strength of your organization in the work you do?
- How can we [the participants and the facilitator] create a system for mutual support?
- What is your organization doing well in addressing wellness among staff members?
- How does your organization currently measure impact on healing and resilience in immigrant communities?
- Reflect on the time you had to build trust. What was your strategy? If unable to accomplish trust, what was your lesson learned?

3. Encouraging critical reflection and dialogue

- **Critical dialogue encourages participants to address systemic challenges.**
A key premise of Community of Practice is that learners are not passive recipients of external knowledge; instead, it empowers them with a sense of agency over their own thinking and learning. Facilitators of this approach believe that learning occurs through critical thinking and reflection on their practice. As the sessions progressed, the participants were encouraged to engage with critical dialogues; their interactions shifted from facilitator-led responses to authentic peer dialogues, which enabled the immigrant nonprofit leaders to address the systemic challenges they sometimes feel as organizational leaders from marginalized communities.

B. Challenges and Potential Improvements

- **Diverse capacity-building needs among grantee organizations require individually tailored support and a peer-based learning community.**
Some challenges were identified by the participants and the session observations: 1) a lack of engagement from the entire group; 2) a lack of critical dialogues throughout the sessions; 3) the need for tailored individual support; 4) and a lack of collective strategies for follow-up actions. Some felt that the virtual format hindered personal connections and limited opportunities to learn more deeply about each other's organizations and communities. A few grantee participants noted that tailored individual support or mentoring is still needed in addition to the peer-based learning opportunity. The organizations selected for the Fund's award differ in terms of size, history, and experience. This diversity leads to a wide array of needs within the group, requiring the facilitator to tailor their strategies to address different types of challenges in appropriate formats or settings. Whether providing individual support or fostering a supportive peer-based learning opportunity, the promising practices that emerged from the Fund's partnership approach—such as cultivating trust and centering nonprofit leaders' experiences—are essential.

C. Potential Factors to Shifting Power Dynamics

- **Community of Practice has contributed to equalizing funder-grantee relationships.**

The Fund's Community of Practice provided an opportunity for grantees to develop a relationship with the Foundation in a new way.

Its participatory structure and approach enabled the Immigrant nonprofit leaders to serve as active contributors of knowledge, the facilitator as a guide or a connector, and the Foundation staff as a listener and learner. This shift in roles has questioned traditional ideas about resource ownership and power distribution in capacity building. In traditional funder-grantee relationships, grantees receive financial resources from funders. This obligatory, hierarchical relationship is often replicated in the capacity-building context. Grantees are normally viewed as the recipients of capacity building, the receiver of knowledge and technical skills needed to enhance their work. Parallel to financial resources, knowledge is a resource, and resources are power. The traditional power dynamic, where funders are positioned as resource providers and grantees as recipients, often overlooks the culturally relevant resources grantees already possess—such as wealth of community wisdom and lived-experience—that are essential for addressing the very challenges funders aim to help resolve.

By adopting a participatory capacity-building approach such as the Community of Practice, the Foundation and the facilitator fostered a relationship of equal co-learners and co-leaders with grantee representatives.

“This [topic of emotional wellbeing of the immigrant community] is new. Nobody was talking about immigration trauma but we are doing it here.... We are the educators for this theme...We are trailblazers.”
– Community of Practice Participant

IV. Recommendations and Considerations for the New Political Landscape

The study offers valuable insights on how capacity building for grantees can become more participatory and community-centered, with a possibility of creating more equitable funder-grantee relationships. The report concludes with three key areas for recommendations and consideration 1) recommendations for the Foundation and its partners, 2) suggestions for other funders interested in facilitating a Community of Practice or participatory capacity building with their grantees, and 3) considerations on how to support immigrant-led organizations in light of a new political landscape.

A. Recommendations for the Scattergood Foundation and the Fund

- Consider diversifying the session format. Incorporate small group discussions organized by topic, their community’s cultural or linguistic backgrounds, or organizational experience. This approach may encourage participation from individuals who are less comfortable speaking in larger groups.
- Offer a mix of in-person and virtual sessions, along with opportunities for written reflection. This approach can support a variety of learning and communication styles, making the Community of Practice more inclusive and accessible.
- Consider engaging returning grantees in co-facilitation roles. For example, returning organizational leaders could help facilitate collective problem-solving sessions and collective strategies for follow-up actions, potentially in a stipend-supported capacity.
- Continue partnering with experienced consultants. Cultivate relationships with consultants who understand the evolving needs of the grantees and the communities they serve, share the Foundation’s values, and work with adaptability.

B. Recommendations for Funders Interested in Participatory Capacity Building

- Build your own capacity to become listeners and learners of your grantees' experience. Funders whose aim is to make their capacity-building initiatives more inclusive and participatory should first reflect on the institutional relationships with grantees and the communities they serve, then intentionally build their own capacity to create long-term, authentic partnerships with their grantees and the communities they serve, rather than pursuing an isolated, one-off effort for participatory capacity building.
- Understand the pedagogical principles. The Community of Practice, grounded in the social learning framework, views participants as co-creators of learning resources. It facilitates a process of collective inquiry and problem-solving that is relevant to its members, their organizations, and the communities they serve.
- Hire a facilitator whose cultural identity and pedagogical approach are in alignment with your project and your organization. Consider factors such as the facilitator's racial, cultural, linguistic, socio-economical and geographical backgrounds, as well as their pedagogical approaches, including inquiry-based, asset-based, trauma-informed, or culturally responsive methods.

C. Considerations for the Current Political Landscape

In the face of unprecedented threats to their communities, immigrants and refugees now find themselves in an extremely vulnerable position. However, viewing them solely as vulnerable and powerless only reinforces a deficit-based perspective that the Fund has worked to reverse. While immigrant-led and immigrant-serving organizations are at risk, they are also powerful and equipped with collective knowledge and experience.

Community-based, immigrant-led organizations possess the knowledge and experience in grass-roots movements to respond to both hostile socio-political climates and unforeseen health and economic threats. Immigrant and refugee nonprofit leaders have firsthand experience with instability and political upheaval both abroad and in the U.S. Although their previous experiences differ from the current socio-political context that poses unprecedented challenges, immigrant nonprofit leaders and their staff bring valuable lived experience. They also bring essential linguistic and cultural knowledge to support their communities effectively.

Funders' support for building a network of community-based immigrant-serving organizations, such as the one the Fund has been providing, has become more important.

It encourages the immigrant-serving organizations to unite and inform one another, share strategies, and consolidate resources and power to protect and empower their communities.

The Fund's commitment to an asset-based approach—leveraging the lived experience and wisdom of immigrant leaders—is crucial now more than ever.

Participatory Grantmaking: Important Context for the Fund's Community of Practice

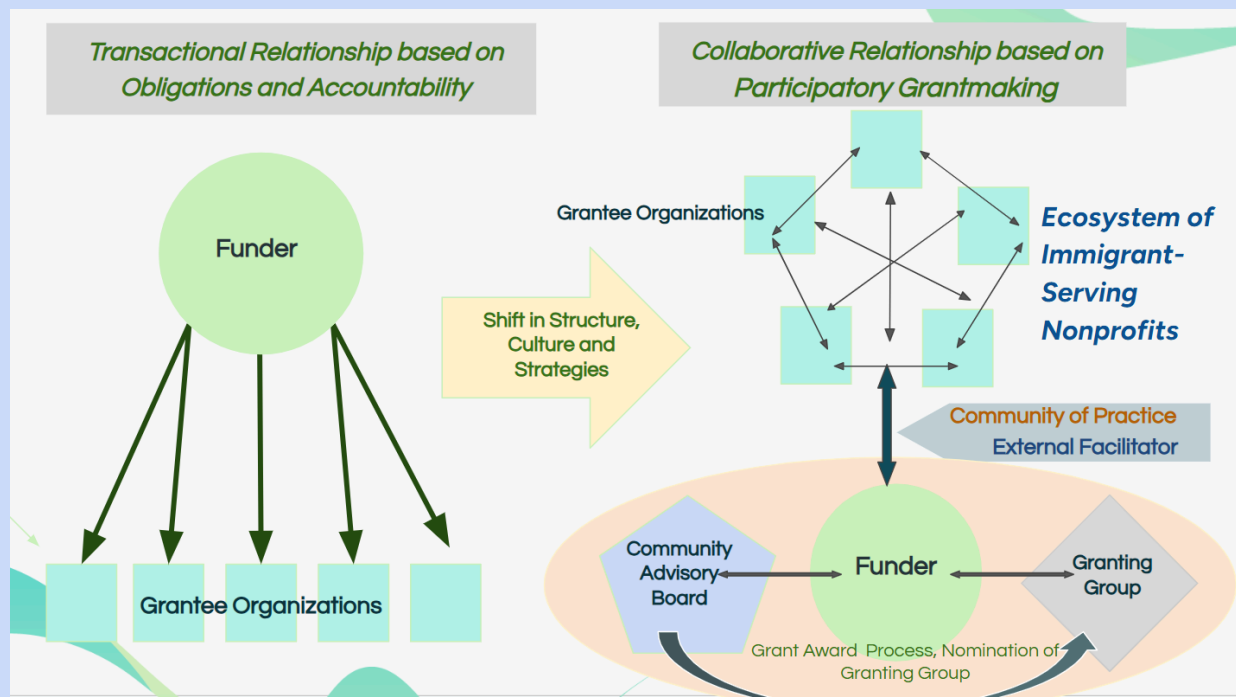
Over the past five years, the Community Fund has developed a participatory grantmaking (PGM) process to create inclusive strategies for its funding distribution. The Foundation staff has made a significant effort to value the perspectives of leaders in immigrant communities by establishing a Community Advisory Board and a Granting Group, both of which are mainly represented by community members.¹³ This participatory funding process cultivated a sense of trust with community representatives.¹⁴ The Foundation's openness to learning from these community representatives has strengthened its capacity to build more equitable partnerships. A member of the Community Advisory Board noted that the relationship between foundations and communities is typically "a one-way street," with deficit-based thinking toward immigrants, prevalent in the philanthropic field. The Fund's Community Advisory Board, however, worked to facilitate an asset-based approach instead:

"I remember [talking at the advisory board meetings] why don't we rethink that (deficit model) and think about ...how (immigrant) people can come to the table? And how can immigrants who will be impacted by the grant can be decision makers? So, that led to many conversations to shape the participatory process we were involved with."
– Community Advisory Board Member

A Granting Group member who was involved with the award decision making process highlighted the significance of the Fund opening the door for small community-based organizations that "historically ...have not been part [of the grant process]." She noted immigrants' and refugees' historical mistrust of institutions associated with money and power in their homelands.

The graphic below presents a simplified chart illustrating an analysis of the Fund's participatory grantmaking and capacity-building structures and processes. Unlike a conventional, "one-way" transactional relationship between funders and grantees (as noted by the key informant cited above), the Fund's participatory model positions the funder as a supporter, connector, and facilitator of empowerment and mutual learning among grantee organizational leaders.

"Money is not the only important thing. It's what money is doing... This [the Fund] gives a sense of hope. It gives you a chance for a change... Many of us [as immigrants and refugees] come from places where money has been used for no good. The ones who have access have abused their power. It [participatory grantmaking] reduces the mystery of the grantmaking process..."
– Granting Group Member



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Endnotes

1. This report summarizes the author's capstone paper, submitted in May 2025 to the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Philosophy degree.
2. Capacity building is defined as "the process of building and strengthening the system, structures, cultures, skills, resources, and power that organizations need to serve their communities" (Nishimura et al. 2020, p.32).
3. See the blog article for more details about the participatory funds, Building Partnerships through Participatory Grantmaking (PGM), scattergoodfoundation.org/building-partnerships-through-participatory-grantmaking-pgm/
4. Although immigrants and refugees face similar challenges and opportunities in the United States, their reasons for migration, immigration processes, and statuses differ. To avoid redundancy, this report refers to both groups collectively as "immigrants."
5. Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Wenger, et al., 2022, p.4). Grounded in the social learning framework, Community of Practice views participants as co-creators of learning resources (Lave and Wenger, 1991). See the blog article for more details on the concept; Community of Practice: Centering Immigrant Leaders' Lived Experience as Learning Resources. scattergoodfoundation.org/community-of-practice-centering-immigrant-leaders-lived-experience-as-learning-resources/
6. The eleven grantee organizations serve multiple counties, including Philadelphia (across North, Southwest, Southwest, and Northeast neighborhoods), Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties. These organizations vary in terms of their history and budget sizes, with establishments dating from 1979 to 2017 and annual budgets ranging from \$130,000 to \$2,976,000. The immigrant and refugee populations served by these organizations are diverse, including Latinx individuals (from Central and South America, including indigenous people), East, Southeast, and South Asians, African and Afro-Caribbean communities, as well as Middle Eastern and Eastern European populations. All participating grantees are provided a stipend in addition to the grant funding they receive to participate in the Community of Practice.
7. Two Foundation staff members were present in the sessions to provide an overview at the beginning, offer logistical support and listen to the discussions.
8. Participation in this study is based on the concept of meaningful participation defined as "the proactive involvement of community members, particularly those from historically excluded groups, in guiding decisions, setting agendas, and distributing resources that impact their daily lives." (Porticus, 2024)
9. Immigrant-led organizations are led and shaped by people who themselves are immigrants. The leadership and decision-making come from people who have lived the immigrant experience.
10. Asset-based questions are the type of questions that assume that respondents already possess valuable knowledge and focus on drawing out their existing strengths and lived experiences.
11. Lived Experience is defined as the experience(s) of people for whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct personal impact. (Sandhu, 2017. P. 5)
12. Systemic challenges differ from short-term, quick-fix technical challenges, problems that can be resolved using existing expertise to improve organizational effectiveness, without altering the underlying norms or the status quo of the system. In contrast, addressing systemic challenges involves confronting and rethinking the existing norms, values, and/or policies. Argyris and Schön (1974)
13. Community Advisory Board (CAB) develops grant strategy and Requests for Proposals and nominates members of a Granting Group. CAB has been organization-based with individuals representing immigrant-serving organizations, all of which focus on some element of health and wellbeing. The majority of CAB members are immigrants/refugees. Granting Group members review applications and make selections for grant awards. All Granting Group members have lived experience as a first- or second-generation immigrant.
14. Trust building is always work-in-progress. It is not suggested that the Community Fund has developed a complete trust from the immigrant-led organizations and leaders, but the key informant interview data shows that they have made an intentional effort to build the culture of trust in their partnership with the community.

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