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Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action, Volume 17, Number 3, Fall 2023, pp. 439-446 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Moving From Transactional to Relational: How Funders Can Work in Partnership With Black, Indigenous and People of Color Communities

Racial Equity Coalition and United Way of King County Partnership

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Submitted 7 February 2022, revised 28 July 2022, accepted 10 August 2022.

Abstract

Background: The Racial Equity Coalition (REC) formed to address persistent educational disparities. The coalition was composed of 14 Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) organizations that provide culturally integrative youth services.

Objectives: REC, with support from United Way of King County, engaged in participatory research to identify commonalities and shared struggles to inform collective action. Participatory research aligns with REC's commitment to equitable participatory processes. This article focuses on REC's experiences with funders. The objective was to understand what creates positive and challenging experiences with funders, and to identify recommendations for funders to become more culturally responsive.

Methods: A research committee was formed including representatives of nine REC organizations and United Way of King County staff. The committee conducted interviews with each of the 14 REC organizations and conducted thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Through participatory analysis, the committee drafted narratives that were further refined through a series of research retreats attended by all REC organizations.

Results: Recommendations were to incentivize collaboration, listen to communities to create culturally responsive definitions of success and measurement strategies, arrive at mutually agreed upon approaches with organizations, honor the connections BIPOC organizations have with their communities, and provide unrestricted funding to allow BIPOC organizations greater agency.

Conclusions: A major challenge for BIPOC organizations is navigating White dominant culture that too often shows up in funding requirements. Having to fit dominant culture standards stifles BIPOC organizations' abilities to meet community needs and the responsiveness of their approaches. REC identified recommendations for funders to be more culturally responsive and community centered.

Keywords

Community-based participatory research, philanthropy, BIPOC coalition, systems change, Northwestern United States

Educational disparities in King County, Washington are clear. Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) are less likely to graduate from high school and are disciplined at higher rates than their White counterparts.¹ While

the average King County graduation rate is almost 80%, major and long-standing differences exist across races/ethnicities.² Additionally, school districts with lower graduation rates are often those with a higher concentration of students of color,

low-income students, and those with limited English proficiency. It is imperative to eliminate these persistent disparities to ensure all youth have positive educational and life outcomes.

United Way of King County (UWKC) saw BIPOC organizations' power to address disparities through culturally relevant support that connects youth to their cultures in ways that strengthen their ability to navigate and advocate for change in schools and systems that were not designed with them in mind.³⁻⁶ UWKC compared youth outcomes for historically White and BIPOC organizations and found BIPOC organizations have better outcomes for all youth regardless of race. UWKC shifted funding to BIPOC organizations in 2020, supporting 14 BIPOC organizations that provide culturally integrative youth services. These organizations came together around their shared commitment to address educational disparities and improve academic/life outcomes for BIPOC youth, calling themselves the Racial Equity Coalition (REC). REC worked with an external consultant to develop a vision, values and a consensus-based decision-making structure. In addition to monthly coalition meetings, REC created a research sub-committee comprised of REC members who volunteered to co-lead the research.

One area of the research examined experiences with funders that impact REC's ability to meet the needs of BIPOC youth. Challenges emerge when philanthropic practices fail to consider racial equity. A racial equity lens "brings into focus the ways in which race and ethnicity shape experiences with power, access to opportunity, treatment, and outcomes, both today and historically."⁷ Challenges with traditional philanthropic practices include absence of cultural responsiveness, heightened skepticism of BIPOC organizational capabilities, inadequate accounting of systemic racism, and persistent underfunding of BIPOC organizations.⁷⁻¹¹ In 2018, for example, "only 6 cents of every philanthropic dollar [was] devoted to racial equity, and only 1 cent toward racial justice."⁹ This article highlights REC's experiences with funders and concludes with recommendations for funders to better support BIPOC organizations and communities.

METHODS

All REC members from the 14 organizations were invited to join the participatory research (PR) committee. Based upon interest and availability, eleven representatives from nine REC organizations joined the committee. The committee met via Zoom twice monthly for 6 months. Consistent with PR, the

committee was actively involved in all phases of the research from identifying the research question to disseminating findings. Other members of the committee included a UWKC staff, a UWKC intern, and one academic partner. The study was approved by one REC organization's community review board and deemed exempt by the academic partner's institutional review board.

The committee developed an interview guide including such questions as how do you know REC has met community needs, what challenges has REC faced in meeting community needs, and what are key lessons you would share with funders. Committee members conducted 14 interviews with representatives from each of the REC organizations. Every committee member was invited to interview a fellow REC member employed at a different organization. Based upon time and interest, a REC member conducted two interviews while the remaining twelve interviews were equally split between the UWKC staff member, UWKC student intern, and academic partner. Each organization determined who would be interviewed based upon their involvement with REC. Twelve of the interviews involved the executive directors. For one interview, both the executive director and a staff member were interviewed together. For the other interview, the executive director invited their involved staff member to review their interview transcript and provide additional insight directly into the transcript. Interviews ranged from 60 to 75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Each interviewee was invited to revise their transcript prior to analysis. Several interviewees added new information, clarified statements, and/or edited comments.

Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose for thematic analysis. UWKC staff and the academic partner conducted line-by-line coding and generated coding reports. Committee members worked in groups of three to five to analyze coding reports to assess coding decisions, identify additional themes and refine analysis. Based on the committee's analysis, UWKC staff and the academic partner drafted narratives derived from the coding reports. Committee members reviewed and revised draft narratives.

The committee scheduled three retreats with all REC members. Prior to the retreats, REC members were assigned to breakout groups and sent two to four narratives one week prior to the retreat. Members reviewed assigned narratives keeping these questions in mind:

- What needs clarification?
- What needs to be added/removed?
- What surprised you?

Committee members facilitated the groups, which were recorded with notes taken. Notes could be seen in real time as facilitators shared their screens and made changes directly into the draft narratives. Each group spent 90 minutes discussing assigned narratives and reconvened for 30 minutes to report back.

Adhering to an iterative process, UWKC staff and the academic partner revised the narratives based on retreat feedback. The retreat feedback clarified and added to the findings derived from the analysis of the interview transcripts. For example, the feedback yielded additional recommendations for funders. Revised narratives lived in a shared Google folder where REC members reviewed and edited the revisions to ensure they accurately told REC’s story. Consistent with PR, data is owned by REC. This paper focuses on the narratives specific to funding challenges given REC identified this as a primary barrier to fully serving BIPOC youth.

RESULTS

Results are organized by positive experiences with funders, challenges working with funders, and funder recommendations.

Positive Experiences: Relational Connection and Participatory Funding

Positive relationships with funders were characterized as community-centered, flexible, and responsive. In such relationships, funders resist a rigid, hierarchical approach that imposes requirements rather than honor cultural practices. As one interviewee shared,

Our ways of leadership are different from typical American ways of leadership to where usually it’s like a pyramid structure. Grant related processes have sometimes followed this structure in the past, systemically; whereas our leadership culturally, views effective leadership as leading from the ground up, and from the back forward . . .

Interviewees also spoke to the value of “mutual trust and understanding” and “deep transparency and care,” which contributed to a relational versus transactional dynamic.

Several interviewees pointed to how relational connection can be fostered when funding staff are from the BIPOC community with “shared life experiences.” These experiences help establish “common ground and a common understanding.” A supportive relationship is further strengthened by developing practices that center BIPOC values and priorities. This includes funders showing up and being present and offering individualized and group support. One interviewee further reflected on how an ideal grantor-grantee relationship “really uplifts and elevates the communities that are most difficult to reach. Centering love and compassion and understanding, and genuinely listening to each other.”

Another positive funding experience was REC’s success with participatory funding. Through a competitive funding opportunity, REC secured dollars to provide coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID) relief to the communities they serve. Working as a coalition to secure funds fostered trust amongst REC members by demonstrating their collective power. Or as one interviewee reflected,

The whole process over that year of advocacy around the [Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account] funding to when we got to the final verdict on that was formative. More than anything, it wasn’t even all about just the amount of money we eventually got, but it was about that process of coming together and advocating together.

Once funds were secured, REC engaged in participatory funding to equitably distribute funds amongst each other. This entailed allocating funds to REC organizations who most needed it and were positioned to quickly distribute funds to their respective communities. Need in part accounted for which communities were hardest hit by COVID. Interviewees noted this was accomplished without barriers of competition that typically result when funders pit nonprofits against one another. REC members were instead “willing to shift funding, even away from their own organizations.”

Challenges Working With Funders

Funding challenges were often framed in terms of navigating White dominant frameworks. Cutting across these challenges was BIPOC organizations having to expend energy to educate funders or finding themselves either working to transform funding approaches or adapting their own approaches

to fit funder requirements. While REC organizations engaged in funder education, too often funder requirements remained. Instead of demonstrating reciprocity, funders offer technical and other assistance to organizations to fit their requirements.

Having to deal with systems that are still operating in kind of this White supremacist capitalist framework is really, really challenging . . . I was definitely conflicted around how much labor we were putting into educating [funders], and how I didn't feel like that was really being reciprocated.

Our challenge is some of this funding . . . [has] a standard that they don't want to bend, but not understanding the cultural aspect of it. And then we have to work so hard to tell them that hey this is how we are; this is how our community works and still have to prove them so many ways before we can actually get them say to yes when they should just say okay you guys are different. Okay, we'll make sure that this money will fit the way you need it, not the way the funding wants you to be.

Funding challenges can cause missed opportunities due to cultural and linguistic barriers. One interviewee, for example, shared how funders denied their proposal to teach youth their native language and instead suggested teaching English. These challenges create a "burden of code-switching" and "a massive drain on resources." Others spoke to challenges implementing grant requirements that cause misalignment and undermine BIPOC organizations' abilities to connect and support BIPOC youth. More specifically, this occurs when staff are required to gather information they know will harm their relationship with the youth and/or community.

Other funder challenges included rigid reporting requirements, non-community driven definitions of program success, and imposition of traditional metrics that were not culturally responsive. REC's identified BIPOC-oriented metrics centered such components as relationships, positive cultural and ethnic identity, community-readiness and self-determination. Examples of how REC defines success included:

When you start a program with high level gang involved, criminal justice involved young people, and a year into one of the programs, I've hired four of the young men full-time as community peer-to-peer

ambassadors to work in the community because they were so good at what they were doing going through the program. They were so on point, so intelligent, so intellectual. All these guys needed was an opportunity . . . That's what it's all about, getting young people in a space where they can be brilliant because they are brilliant. Success looks like helping them tap into their brilliance and opening up the doors of opportunities . . .

[Youth] learn to creatively work through challenges that they face, together and also stand-alone . . . They develop confidence in themselves, their identity, understanding who they are and they have a lot of peer and adult support to do that from the greater . . . community and then they demonstrate that they're community-ready . . . to contribute and give back to the community.

A recurring challenge was how funders privilege one way of measuring or determining impact that does not center community priorities. This practice overrides community decisions on how their story is told. As one interviewee shared,

Research compels us to put value on specific types of data. Whereas we're lifting up here the importance and the power of stories, and the importance of the feedback that we get from program participants and parents and others as a measure of success. I think there's a bigger, broader conversation around how do we undo kind of Western approaches to our day to day practices and everywhere it shows up as we continue to move further towards multicultural identity as Americans.

Misaligned data requirements furthermore risk undermining cultural considerations and misrepresenting program impact. For example, one interviewee described how funders assess immediate impact failing to account for longer term considerations. This interviewee shared,

. . . the work we're doing in the present time, sometimes we're not going to see the fruition of that maybe even in our lifetime. But it's always in our thought process and it's always within our hope that we wake up with every day that whatever we are doing that given day will

benefit our children and our grandchildren, that they will see the benefits of that work long after we're gone.

A misalignment creates tension or a sense of disconnect given many interviewees' commitment to holistic approaches to understanding success. The preferred holistic approach accounts for contextual factors impacting BIPOC communities such as racism and other forms of social inequities. Another interviewee reflected on challenges when constructs such as "leadership" are narrowly conceptualized and fail to account for different life circumstances. More specifically, the interviewee shared,

. . . [youth participating in the program] may not be able to do every single co-curricular enrichment program because they're also working to support their families and providing childcare for their siblings and care for their elders and they're trying to maintain jobs while also being a student and being a young person. So, I think [our organization] is a space where many different types of leadership show up, and we really want to be able to honor and recognize and support that, and also compensate young people at a level where they can fully participate . . . and maybe don't need a second job on top of their other roles to be able to sustain themselves and their family.

Data requirements also pose unnecessary burdens to "over surveyed BIPOC youth" especially when youth are not compensated, and findings not shared with the community.

Recommendations for Funders

Interviewees identified recommendations for funders, which for some signal a "paradigm shift" from a traditional grantor-grantee dynamic to one that is more community driven, marked by deep respect for community wisdom as well as by a transformational versus transactional orientation. For others it is decolonization that lifts and preserves Indigenous knowledge and leadership. Overall responses pointed to the need for fundamental change, moving away from funders being "snowcapped white at the top and brown at the bottom." This requires structural changes including diversifying leadership, centering BIPOC community priorities, and committing to reflective practices to eradicate the imposition of

dominant cultural practices. As one interviewee shared, it is not about funders "copying and pasting these lessons," but rather taking time to critically consider how to best adopt or adapt recommendations.

Recommendations for funders to enhance responsive funding practices included:

1. Incentivize collaboration instead of fostering competition. For example, several interviewees spoke to instances where individual applicants would receive disproportionate funding as compared to what the coalition would receive. As a result, one interviewee asked,

Are [funders] incentivizing the collaboration and the coalitions that they say that they want to see or are they creating competition?

2. Recognize persistent inequities and their impact on BIPOC communities. Greater awareness is critical to understanding what it takes to "create a more equitable world to undo historical harm and trauma." As one interviewee cautioned, funders need to recognize the inherent strengths in BIPOC communities and not impose solutions. More specifically the interviewee stated,

We need to rest in the truth that our communities can generate their own solutions and preserve our culture [and that] people in power can ally with resources and other support without overstepping or fixing the community.

3. Arrive at mutually agreed upon approaches with grantees versus having a "one-size-fits-all approach." This requires honoring the "deep expertise" and connections BIPOC organizations have with their communities. It also requires active listening to better understand how BIPOC organizations support their communities, set priorities, and determine what constitutes success. As one interviewee shared,

Take a backseat when it comes to always being the ones to define the terms, like define those terms in collaboration with the people that you're calling your grantees, that you're calling the communities that you serve . . . and conducting it in a way that is more relational and less transactional.

4. Resist tendencies requiring BIPOC organizations to prove capacity more than White, mainstream organizations. Several interviewees spoke to experiences where funders questioned their capabilities and in essence failed to recognize the connections and expertise BIPOC organizations have with the communities they are a part of and/or serve.

REC has been put in positions more than once where we've had to defend what our knowledge is, what our level of expertise is in ways that maybe White-led organizations or larger organizations would not have to do, or even be asked. We've had to advocate and make our presence known when we've already all been doing this work respectively for a long time.

5. Eliminate linguistic and cultural barriers undermining organizations' abilities to secure grants. This includes removing colonial constructs that do not acknowledge cultural traditions or socioeconomic factors. As an example of barriers encountered, one interviewee shared that with one grant,

. . . the youth being served have to live in the city of Seattle or go to Seattle School District . . . I can't speak for every tribal nation but some of our tribes in history were very nomadic-like, based on different factors with seasonal knowledge of hunting and gathering in the landscape and things like that. People live in balance with our natural world, spread apart or moving around. We weren't bound by artificial constructs as far as colonial boundaries go. And so, it's really hard when you again try to convey an Indigenous way of being or inform the model of how we see and know things, how we're related and connected.

Interviewees pointed to how such barriers coupled with the tendency to question BIPOC organizations' capacities contribute to inequitable allocation of funding to BIPOC organizations. More specifically, one interviewee shared

A lot of resources are available, but not enough of them are being funneled towards BIPOC-led

organizations or organizations that are directly serving BIPOC communities who are the most impacted by the pandemics. . . . we've had to really go out of our way to advocate for ourselves to actually be the recipients of these funds, especially when so many funders and people are saying that supporting BIPOC organizations is the priority.

6. Provide unrestricted, multi-year funding to allow BIPOC organizations greater agency to determine how to prioritize and allocate funding. Several interviewees pointed to REC's success in using participatory funding processes to ensure timely and effective distribution of COVID relief. As an example, for why unrestricted funding is needed, one interviewee shared

Stop putting so many strongarm holds, chokeholds on these dollars. Like if you say you have a certain amount of dollars that you want to give out to organizations, just give it to them . . . we have our own mission and vision, we have our own core values, we have our own outlines and agendas that we want to run. Don't come in and say hey, I'm gonna give you \$200,000 but I want you to do this. Then you take me away from being my true authentic self by me doing this work and if you take that away from me, the work is not going to get done in the way it should. So free up some of those dollars to unrestricted funds so that we can use them in ways that we know that our community and our constituents need them to be used . . .

7. Support smaller BIPOC organizations to help them grow resources. These organizations have capacity with talented staff and community connections and are just needing support to reach their full potential. This includes funding as well as connection to donors and other resources.

Creat[e] new initiatives that are in response to what communities, especially BIPOC-led small community orgs are saying that they need in order to even be eligible for funding from major foundations that they've had felt like in the past have been just too far out of their reach.

DISCUSSION

A major challenge for BIPOC organizations is navigating White dominant culture. Funders often fail to apply a racial equity lens. This leaves patterns of inequity uncovered⁷ where cultural considerations and priorities are ignored or overridden by funder priorities and requirements.⁹ Interviewees spoke to the harmful consequences of having to fit dominant cultural standards. These standards stifle BIPOC organizations’ abilities to meet community needs and the responsiveness of their approaches. Rigid data requirements are one example where funders undermine and harm how organizations function. As Bopp and colleagues¹² caution,

As staff get caught up in the demands of data practices, autonomy is eroded, data is fragmented, and the organization begins to change through data drift. These consequences come together to result in organizations that are neither empowered nor equipped to think and plan for the long term.

To avoid a “cycle of disempowerment”¹² and genuine harm within BIPOC communities, funders must listen to BIPOC leaders to develop responsive measures of success, rather than privileging dominant metrics focused on immediate outcomes that do not account for long term systems change work.

Building upon recommendations identified by interviewees, Quiroz and colleagues⁷ offer a series of questions for funders to consider as they assess their own processes for racial equity. This includes asking “do we have criteria and policies in place that seem race neutral but may be barriers to potential grantees of color?” Issues of accountability should also be considered, which may prompt questions of whether one’s foundation is accountable to communities or to donors. Le¹¹ further advocates for funders to check for manifestations of White supremacy in philanthropic policies and practices. This includes determining whether:

- Your nonprofit or foundation board is mostly White when the community you serve is mostly people of color.
- Your foundation talks about equity, diversity, and inclusion without moving significant resources to organizations and movements led by racialized and marginalized communities.

- Your capacity building recommendations are based on having communities-of-color-led organizations operate more like White-led organizations.

Ideally, through critical analysis funders will disrupt tendencies to keep “whiteness the default” and “power concentrated in White leaders and institutions.”¹¹

REC’s identified recommendations represent a starting place. Funders are encouraged to adopt/adapt REC’s model with the caveat that it must be driven by BIPOC organizations with power to decide how to distribute funds to best uplift BIPOC communities. Interviewees spoke to REC’s innovative approach, pointing to who sits at the table and drives decision-making: “by people of color, for people of color.” This requires incentivizing collaboration and supporting the work of coalitions. REC’s collective voices have already influenced funding processes. For example, due to REC’s success distributing COVID relief, King County adopted REC’s model in subsequent rounds of COVID relief funds.

To implement these recommendations, funders must recognize how BIPOC organizations are uniquely positioned to serve BIPOC communities due to their lived experiences with racial equity and deep connections with the communities they serve. It also requires uprooting dominant practices that are not inclusive, fail to address structural racism, and result in inequitable funds to BIPOC organizations and racial justice work.^{7,8,13} Or as Batten and Williams¹⁴ assert, “self-determination is an abiding and essential social justice principle, as expressed in the maxim that those most affected by an issue must be at the forefront of resolving that issue.” To accomplish this, more BIPOC individuals from affected communities need to be hired into leadership positions with decision-making power.

LIMITATIONS

Study findings represent experiences from 14 BIPOC organizations. REC’s concerns and recommendations, however, align with issues expressed by other BIPOC-led organizations and affinity groups regarding the challenges with how White dominant culture shows up in philanthropy (e.g., BIPOC ED Coalition Washington State,¹⁵ Change Philanthropy,¹⁶ Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and¹⁷ Native Americans in Philanthropy¹⁸).

Last, a limitation of the research into grantor-grantee dynamics is how funding staff (UWKC) was involved on the research committee and provided administrative support to REC. Despite the involved UWKC staff being BIPOC, it is impossible to eliminate power dynamics. To mitigate these dynamics, UWKC hired consultants to work with REC and facilitate key meetings particularly in the formation phase. Additionally, UWKC staff did not attend funding decision meetings to ensure space for open and honest conversation. These circumstances may have impacted what REC shared in their interviews. However, despite this limitation, REC provided strong recommendations for UWKC and other funders to act on.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by King County Department of Community and Human Services.

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