



BUILDING BLACK EMPOWERMENT WORKS

**A CASE STUDY ON CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL
PHILANTHROPY THROUGH COMMUNITY
LEADERSHIP**

January 2021



United Way
of Greater Cincinnati



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Launching Black Empowerment Works and ultimately investing over \$600K into 28 Black-led ideas (and leaders) in its first year took the work of a lot of dedicated people. While well over 150 people contributed in small and large ways, we particularly want to acknowledge the following folks who, collectively, put in well over 2,500 hours to bring Black Empowerment Works to life.

The 2019-2020 Champions of Change (COC)

Retina Carter*
Marquavius (Marq) Casey
Kendra Davis*
Edita Dolan-Mayo*
Alexis Grimes Trotter*
Reginald Harris
Jalisa Harris*
Terri Hurdle
Ronald Jackson III*
Julius Jenkins*
Chris Macklin*
Rashida Manuel
Jeremy Smith

**indicates Champions who also served as Black Empowerment Works
Volunteer Reviewers*

2019-2020 COC Program Facilitators

Jena Bradley, United Way of Greater Cincinnati
Amber Brown, United Way of Greater Cincinnati
Desire Bennett, Design Impact
Michelle Sucher, Design Impact
with support from Nelson Pierce Jr., formerly with Design
Impact

United Way of Greater Cincinnati Staff

Emma Bachelder	Laura Ford-Harris
Mike Baker	Sarah Ghee
Treva Brinkley	Jennifer Ingram
Emma Chaney	Darius Kemp
Lakeisha Cook	Renee Locke
Karyl Cunningham	Chandra Mathews-
Monica Fornash	Smith

Contractors

Brandon Black, Drawnversation
Chineze Mbamali, Chinezelens

Guest Speakers

Samuel Burbanks
Lauren Jones
Penny Pensak
Iris Roley
Tyran Stallings

2020 Black Empowerment Works

Volunteer Reviewers

Deepika Andavarapu
Julian Collins
Kevin Corey
Cheryl Dukes
Samantha Essel-Addo
Venita Garvin
Edwina Hairston
Angelica Hardee
Calista Hargrove
Eleanor Harris
JoQuetta Hummons
Remington Jackson
Kashara Jones
Sean Mendenhall
Josselyn Okorodudu
Mary Reid
Taisha Rojas-Parker
Rhonda Starghill
Tori Vogelgesang
Dominique Walker
Angela White
Ken Wilson

Olivia Moragne	Matt Steffen
Ross Meyer	Leslie Stevenson
Johanna Navarro	Tiffany Vitagliano
Dami Okunade	Amy Weber
Jennifer Riegert	Maira Weir
Maggie Shell	Charles Wright
Terry Sherrer	Erika Yingling

Additional Volunteers

Dwendolyn Chester
Amber David
Jodi Geiser
Gino McGowens
Eric Rademacher
Mardia Shands
Emma Shirey
Ahmyah Smith

INTRODUCTORY MESSAGE

This case study highlights how a group of community volunteers – coordinated, coached, and cheered on by a team of facilitators – created an equity-focused grant program from the ground up. It's a story about challenging power constructs, trust-based philanthropy, and participatory grant-making.

If you're looking for a report where I tell you how we did everything right, providing you with THE answer to creating a more equitable, accessible grant program... stop reading now. You will be sorely disappointed.

But, if you're interested in getting an honest account of how one funder (United Way of Greater Cincinnati) and 13 community leaders challenged traditional philanthropic practices and built something meaningful in the process, then continue reading. Written from the point of view of a grantmaker and infusing commentary from community volunteers, this report will lay out:

1. Why we've decided it's important to invest in more community-based, Black-led ideas.
2. How we created a program to equip community leaders with the knowledge and tools to create a more informed and responsive grant program.
3. What components the community leaders incorporated in their grant program.
4. Where we go from here.

For points 2 and 3, the report will provide details on what we did, what resulted, what worked well for us, and how we could improve. To close out the sections, we've included other important considerations should you choose to take on similar work.

On behalf of the Champions of Change and the team at United Way, I thank you for taking the time to read this report. If you have recommendations for us, share them. If you want to learn more, reach out. While this is the first, we hope this won't be the last case study on this work.

With gratitude,

Jena' Bradley

Co-author of the Black-led Social Change Cincinnati report (2018)

Co-facilitator, Champions of Change (2019-)

Administrator, Black Empowerment Works grant program (2020-)



BACKGROUND

At United Way of Greater Cincinnati, we believe in creating a community where everyone has an opportunity to thrive. Poverty undermines that opportunity for more than 600,000 people in our region. While poverty is pervasive, Black people are experiencing poverty at higher rates than other racial groups (1 in 3 Black families, compared to 1 in 10 white families). While the causes of this over-representation are varied in nature, many find their roots in racist, biased systems and policies, perpetuated either consciously or unconsciously.

When looking at this issue from a philanthropic lens, the over-representation of Black families experiencing poverty is coupled with an under-investment in Black-led ideas and communities to address it. This under-investment is long-running and happens both locally and nationally.

Nationally...

22%

Poverty Rate for Black people.

1.8%

Share of funding supporting Black people in the U.S., 2017

While we know that solely investing in more community-based, Black-led ideas won't eradicate poverty - especially at the expense of addressing systems that perpetuate inequity - we believe that by making these investments, we can:

- Bring a greater diversity of solutions and thought leadership into our organization's work.
- Gain a better understanding of the unique strengths, opportunities and challenges within communities.
- Collaborate on strategies that reduce disparities in outcomes.

Our central question became: **How might we increase United Way of Greater Cincinnati's investment in Black-led, community-based ideas by 2019?** To answer this question, we not only researched national trends, we spoke directly with people in our communities. We interviewed people in their offices and homes, brought together a diverse group of leaders for a session to generate ideas based on opportunities, and held focus groups. This work birthed the [Black-led Social Change Cincinnati report](#), named after the deeply informative report from ABFE entitled, "[The Case for Funding Black-led Social Change](#)". With invaluable structure and design support from [Design Impact](#) (a Cincinnati-based nonprofit social innovation firm), the report lifts up common themes, co-created concepts we could test, and recommendations made by the community on how we could better show up and do equity-oriented work.

Committed to ensuring the report wouldn't collect metaphorical dust on a digital shelf, we got to work. This report describes our journey of implementing two concepts from the Black-led Social Change Report: Champions of Change and Growing Grassroots (now named Black Empowerment Works)

ABOUT THE CONCEPTS

Champions of Change and Black Empowerment Works were two programs piloted in 2019-2020, based on two concepts in the [Black-led Social Change Cincinnati report](#) - Champions of Change and Growing Grassroots. You can find the full concept descriptions on pages 10 and 12 of the report linked above.

Champions of Change

At its core, Champions of Change is a think *and do* tank. A network of Black leaders who, through a shared vision, set an agenda for what Black social change could look like in Cincinnati by guiding work inside and outside of our organization. Two of the potential activities for this group, as outlined in the concept: develop new Requests for Proposals (RFPs) and assist in the United Way RFP selection process.

Two important notes on the concept:

1. Defining "leader": We look for folks who hold both traditional and non-traditional roles of power - people who are leaders in their own right, and in their communities.
2. Combining Concepts: Champions of Change was not designed to be a standalone concept, but instead paired with other work. To us, it made logical sense to pair this concept with Growing Grassroots.

Growing Grassroots

When you think about the question, "How might we increase investment in community-based, Black-led ideas?", your answer is likely, "By giving them money." This straightforward option is best captured in the Growing Grassroots concept. The concept calls for identifying Black-led, grassroots efforts, funding them based on selection from a panel of peers, and highlighting their work.

An important note on this concept: We needed to redefine what is deemed "worthy" of funding, challenging the status quo. Great ideas are not always attached to organizations, and great organizations can often be overlooked by large funders due to lack of proximity. We needed to challenge the age-old assumption that strong back office support = good organization, and weak back office support = bad organization.

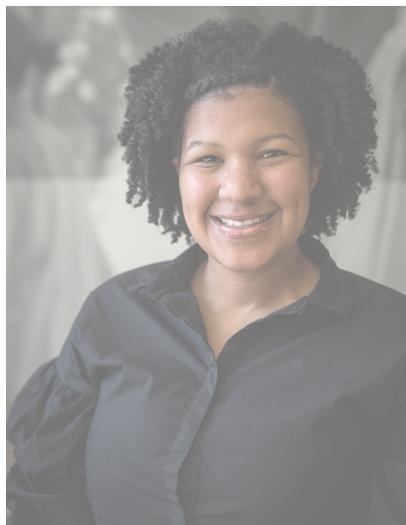
Why these two concepts? Why together?

Of all the concepts, Growing Grassroots has the most broad, tangible impact and aligned well with the work we traditionally do. But we wanted this work to look and feel different. We stand by the phrase from national criminal justice reform advocate Glenn E. Martin that, "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from resources and power". The Champions are closest to the solution.



SO YOU WANT TO RECRUIT COMMUNITY LEADERS FOR YOUR WORK?

Designing, launching, and selecting the first class of
Champions of Change



Designing, Launching and Selecting the First Class of Champions of Change

WHAT WE DID

Equipped with a general sense of what we wanted the Champions to do (build a non-traditional grant program), we worked to build a design team to more fully flesh out the experience and process. Our design team consisted of internal UWGC staff from various departments and two staff members from Design Impact. Over the course of two months, this team:

Ironed out the basic details of the program

Champions of Change is a one-year leadership and design program that brings together community leaders driven to advance Black-led ideas to reduce poverty. In year one, their primary goal will be to build a grassroots grant and support program. Of the 15 Champions slots available, the majority will go to people who identify as Black. Acknowledging that Blackness is not a monolith, we will intentionally recruit and select a diverse group of Champions based on experience, perspective, and demographics (age, gender identity/sexual orientation, income, education, veteran status, and beyond). Champions will meet monthly, with work in between for an estimated time commitment of eight hours per month. Using human-centered design practices, they will connect with and learn from other community leaders to inform the design of their grant program. Beyond designing the program, Champions will also run it. Staff from United Way and Design Impact will serve as process facilitators.

Created a communications/outreach plan with associated collateral

We wanted to recruit community leaders who hold traditional and non-traditional seats of power, and who are at different stages of their leadership journey. To reach folks, we created a digital outreach strategy that consisted of social media, traditional media, and targeted asks. Our media toolkit consisted of program-branded images, social media blurbs, a press release, and a one-pager. All materials directed people to the landing page we built out on our website. This website provided more detailed information and a link to the application.

Created an application and selection process

Our selection process was based on two steps: a written application and a phone conversation. The short online application consisted of demographic questions and asked about the applicant's vision for the future, what skills they felt they could contribute to their project, and their ability to commit to the program. We identified community members to serve as application reviewers. Working in smaller teams, reviewers rated applicants against a common rubric and identified who they felt should be considered as finalists. Staff members conducted phone conversations with finalists and used the combined information to select a diverse team of Champions.

THE RESULT

We were pleasantly surprised by the response: 73 people applied to be Champions in this inaugural year. We ultimately selected 15 community leaders. This first class consisted of professional dancers and professors, community activists and communications strategists, students and parents. To make the decisions, we engaged seven community members/ United Way volunteers.

Designing, Launching and Selecting the First Class of Champions of Change (cont'd.)

WHAT WORKED WELL FOR US

- **Building a design team with diverse skills.** From the beginning, we laid out what skills we needed on the team and allowed people to opt into the team based on those skills.
- **Communicating with the larger organization about the project.** One of the most common ways that applicants heard about the program was through a United Way staff member. When you bring people along, they are more willing (and able) to serve as ambassadors for your work.
- **Leveraging social media and community influencers to get the word out.** Social media was the most common way people learned about the opportunity, followed by hearing about it from a community leader. When we launched the program, we pulled together a list of community influencers and groups and sent them direct information about the program.
- **Going beyond professional experience and demographics to ask people about their vision and passions.** Don't get me wrong – asking for demographic information was important to ensure baseline group diversity, but the passion and vision questions gave us more insight into the character of applicants.
- **Name-blinding applications when determining finalists.** This allowed for a less-biased decision-making.
- **Having phone conversations with finalists prior to selection.** In these 10-30-minute calls, we reinforced expectations, and got to know the applicants better than we could just through paper.

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED

- **Having a longer application window/building a longer runway for people to hear about the opportunity.** The application was open for 21 days. While we received 73 complete applications at the close, several people informed us that they heard about the opportunity right before or long after the deadline.
- **Further diversifying the group by recruiting and selected more Champions with current lived experience.** Our 2019-2020 Champions were a phenomenal, dynamic group of leaders. Under-represented in our group, however, were folks currently experiencing poverty (though many had direct lived experience), and people who fit into our target audience for grants.
- **Finding opportunities to connect applicants not selected into other work.** Many of the applicants we didn't select could have contributed to other work within United Way.
- **Emphasizing the time commitment and the work involved.** Polling our Champions at the conclusion of the program, about half of the group indicated that, compared to their initial expectations, the monthly time commitment was greater than expected.
- **Allowing Champions to opt out of compensation, rather than opt in.** This was a point of debate for our design team, and for some of the Champions. While the dollars saved allowed for us to invest more on the grants side, we feel it is important to honor people's time and compensate them for their expertise.

Designing, Launching and Selecting the First Class of Champions of Change (cont'd)

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN UNDERTAKING THIS WORK

- What's your "why" for engaging community leaders? If your answer involves representation without power, don't do it.
- How much internal capacity are you able to dedicate to this work? The size of the program should correlate with the capacity available to carry it out.

NEW

SEEKING

TRAINED



CHANGE

SO, YOU WANT TO EMPOWER COMMUNITY LEADERS TO DESIGN A GRANT PROGRAM?

The Champions of Change build the Black
Empowerment Works program.

COMMUNITY
PARTICIPATION
AND INPUT



The Champions of Change Build Black Empowerment Works

WHAT WE DID

The design team decided early on that the primary features of the program would be teaching the Champions some principles of human-centered design and using the approach to build the grant program. IDEO.org describes human-centered design as “...a process that starts with the people you’re designing for and ends with new solutions that are tailor made to suit their needs.”

We created a high-level sketch of the program, inclusive of monthly, 3-hour sessions with homework in between meetings. We presented the following calendar at our first Champions session.

- Session 1 (May 2019): Introduction + Orientation to Power: Getting to know each other, the project, and how we want power to show up in our work.
- Session 2 (June 2019): Preparing for Discovery: Overview of the human-centered design process, and development of our design questions and process. Following this session, Champions would go out and talk to grassroots leaders.
- Session 3 (July 2019): Synthesis + Prototyping: Make sense of what the Champions heard during their discovery work by grouping their insights into themes, and then creating ideas. Create prototypes of ideas and test them out.
- Session 4 (August 2019): Refinement: Refine the program design based on feedback from prototype.
- Session 5 (September 2019): Launch: Launch the grant program, opening up for applications.
- Session 6-12 (October 2019 – April 2020): Run and evaluate the grant program. Select grantees, provide support beyond the grant, and evaluate the program design.
- Session 13 (May 2020): Passing the Torch: Cultivate the next class of Champions of Change.

We deviated from this plan by Session 2. We needed more time than we had allotted to align around shared goals. We overestimated how much work could be done in between sessions, and how much content we could get through during sessions. Throughout the process, we were open to emergence and pivoted based on what the Champions needed and wanted. Pretty early in, the Champions communicated the sentiment that the grant program could either be built quickly or built well. We opted for a well-built program, and our organizational leaders backed this decision. The actual session calendar can be found on the next page.

So rather than launching the grant program in September 2019, we launched in February 2020. We met on Saturdays. We held make-up sessions for folks who couldn’t attend the scheduled ones. We invited guest speakers to our sessions to help inform the work. The United Way facilitators checked in with the Champions individually in between meetings, opting for monthly group check-in calls from February to May 2020. Group text threads were created: one with the Champions and facilitators, and one with just the Champions. We carved out time to share about our personal lives.

CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

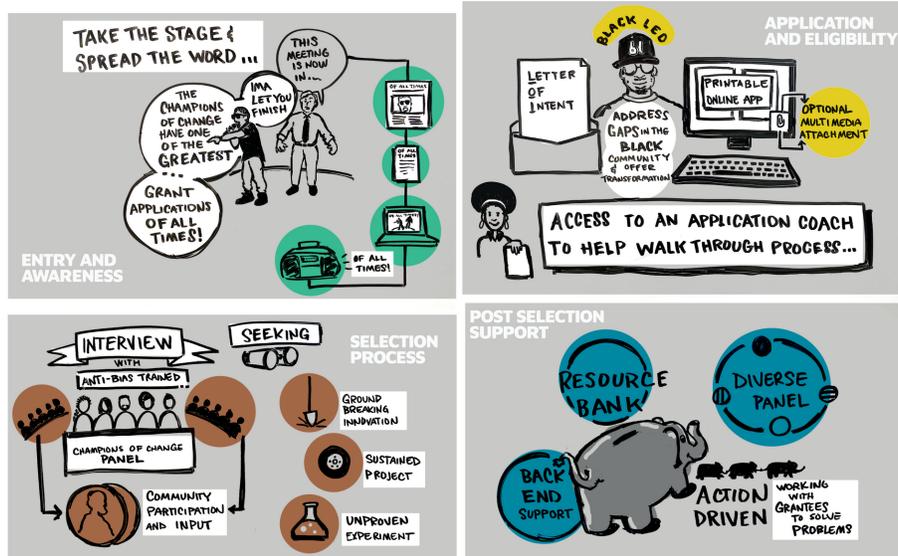
CLASS 1 (2019-2020) CALENDAR

MAY 2019 Session 1 Introduction + Orientation to Power	JUNE 2019 Session 2 Level-Setting + Introduction to Human-Centered Design	JULY 2019 Session 3 Discovery
AUGUST 2019 Session 4 Synthesis	SEPTEMBER 2019 Session 5 Prototyping -Public Input Event- October 15	OCTOBER 2019 Session 6 Refinement Pt. 1
NOVEMBER 2019 Session 7 Retreat 1: Define + Design	DECEMBER 2019 Session 8 Refinement Pt. 2	JANUARY 2020 Session 9 Preparing for Launch 1
FEBRUARY 2020 Session 9.5 Retreat 2 Session 10 Preparing for Launch 2	MARCH 2020 Session 11 Mid-Launch + Build 1 Bi-weekly check-in	APRIL 2020 Session 12 Mid-launch + Build 2 Bi-weekly check-in
MAY 2020 No Sessions Black Empowerment Works decision- making	JUNE 2020 Session 13 Celebration, Reflection + Conclusion	

The Champions of Change Build Black Empowerment Works (cont'd)

While all of the touchpoints were important, there were three that were the pivotal:

1. October 15 Public Event: During this 1.5-hour evening event, the Champions shared out two early designs for the grant program and got a wealth of feedback from attendees. Many of the ideas put forth by community members at this event influenced the final design.



2. November Retreat: This five-hour Saturday meeting was scheduled at the request of the Champions. At the African American Cultural Resource Center at the University of Cincinnati, we came to consensus on our definitions of "Black-led", "grassroots-generated", and "poverty-focused" and we put more detail around each phase of the grant process. As a facilitator, this served as a crystallized moment of the Champions owning the program.

3. February 2020 Session: Just days away from the launch of the grant program, we took time to celebrate our journey over glasses of sparkling cider. Working with Chinezelens, the Champions shot their [promotional video](#) (based on a script they wrote themselves). We looked over all the collateral we created for the grant launch: our information packet, social media imagery, website content, application questions and rubrics, and flyers.

The Champions penned and signed a joint letter, which was included as one of the first pages in the information packet. The Champions were not only involved in the naming and design of Black Empowerment Works (the next section will provide more details on the design), they were engaged in nearly all of the details of execution. They created the website content, application questions, flyers, and selection rubric criteria and design. They scheduled and presented at all of the information sessions, helped create and presented content at the reviewer trainings, and conducted check-in calls with grant applicants during the process. Many went on to serve as reviewers, reading the grant applications and making decisions on which applicants to fund.

The Champions of Change build Black Empowerment Works (cont'd)

THE RESULT

Beyond the obvious success of creating a grant program, the Champions overwhelmingly reported having a positive experience.

- On overall experience, the Champions of Change program received an average rating of 9.9 out of 10.
- When asked if the Champions of Change experience provided participants with the opportunity to network with similarly passionate members of the community, 100% of respondents agreed, with 71.4% strongly agreeing.
- 85.8% of Champions who completed the reflection survey agreed with the statement, "By participating in Champions of Change, I have a stronger relationship or connection to United Way."
- 100% of Champions reported feeling that their perspectives and recommendations were recognized, considered, and valued throughout the process. Similarly 100% of the group reported feeling support by the United Way and Design Impact teams, and that the program met their expectations.

Cumulatively, our Champions put in over 1,100 hours of work before Black Empowerment Works even launched.

WHAT WORKED WELL FOR US

- **Documenting EVERYTHING.** For each session, we sent out agendas in advance. During nearly every session, we took photos. After each session, we sent out a recap along with any documents and slide decks. When a Champion committed to working on something, we made sure to keep track of that. All of these steps worked to ensure everyone was on the same page about decisions made and next steps.
- **Committing to flexibility.** Outside of working on this project, the Champions (and facilitators) led full, complex lives with other responsibilities. Everyone's time is a finite resource and several other priorities were vying for it. To honor this, we as facilitators showed our commitment to flexibility in several ways:
 - All meetings were scheduled based on the Champions' availability. If the majority of Champions could no longer meet at the originally scheduled time, we changed the schedule.
 - We didn't shame people for not being able to attend sessions. Instead, we adopted the philosophy that the people in the room were the right people to do the work and committed to catching others up later. In several instances, individual Champions assumed responsibility for catching their colleagues up.
 - We embraced the fact that we may not get through all of the items on our agenda because important conversations were taking place that we didn't want to cut short. In those instances, we re-worked out future agenda to compensate.
 - Staff checked in with the Champions often to see how we could best be of service to them in meeting their goals.
 - Staff assumed active, supporting roles in carrying out their vision. They set out the roadmap and we handled some of the technical and logistical pieces.
- **Creating a Team Contract.** We collaboratively designed a team contract, or the operating principles of our group. We reminded the full group of these principles at the start of each meeting and called to attention when we weren't adhering to them.

The Champions of Change build Black Empowerment Works (cont'd)

WHAT WORKED WELL FOR US (cont'd)

- **Showing up authentically and honestly (and creating an environment of authenticity and honesty).** As a group tasked with a big project, the Champions had to establish trust of one other quickly. As staff members facilitating a group of volunteers through an ambiguous process, we had to gain the Champions' trust and frequently show humility. To create an environment of authenticity and honesty, we modeled the behavior: we shared about our lives, we were vulnerable, and frequently answered questions with, "I don't know, but we can figure that out together". We didn't come into the space as the "professionals", we came into the space with the mindset that we were learning too.
- **Leveraging technology to stay organized.** While it wasn't perfect, we used online platforms to keep ourselves organized (we used Slack in the beginning, migrated to Microsoft Teams and used the Google platform intermittently). The Planner feature in Microsoft teams was especially helpful as we prepared for the launch of the grant program.

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED

- **More retreats.** Several Champions noted this as an opportunity for improvement in their reflection surveys, both for the purposes of getting to know each other better and having more concentrated time together to get work done. Hosting these retreats offsite is a bonus.
- **More space to create and collaborate.** Some of our agendas were very lecture-dense and they didn't always provide a lot of time for creativity and collaboration.

- **Ensuring that the pacing of the program doesn't dramatically change without warning.** One of the Champions said it best: "I appreciated the creative design thinking approach, however, there needs to be a clear explanation of it up front... The Champions need to understand the process will be slow during [the start]. I felt very rushed after the second session... like there was an abrupt change from being very slow to suddenly going warp speed..."
- **More opportunities for external feedback.** While the interviews and public event was a great touchpoint and there were a few smaller engagements with the United Way leadership team and Board, having more opportunities for direct input and feedback would have been preferable.
- **Making sure everyone has a shared understanding of what success looks like as early as possible.** Several points in sessions were tense because it was apparent that we were not all "working from the same playbook".
- **COMPENSATING CHAMPIONS FOR THEIR TIME.** This was listed as an improvement in the prior section, but is so important that we chose to list it twice.

The Champions of Change build Black Empowerment Works (cont'd)

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN UNDERTAKING THIS WORK

- Do you have budget set aside for the design work? Not including our contract with Design Impact or any other expenses we might have incurred but didn't (such as conferences and in-person sessions cancelled because of COVID, and stipends for Champions), we incurred over \$6,000 in expenses. This includes food, space rentals, childcare, event costs, and contracts for additional services we couldn't provide in-house.
- What services and/or platforms do you already pay for or have access to? Find ways to use those.
- If the facilitators of your program aren't Black (or belong to whatever group you're intentionally engaging), think about how you name that. Having mostly Black women as facilitators for a program focused on Black folks was noted as an asset.



Picture: Champions at the November Retreat at UC

A woman with glasses and curly hair is speaking to a man at a table. She is gesturing with her hands. The man is listening and has his hands clasped. There is a laptop, a phone, and a water cup on the table. The background shows a table with a red bowl and a bottle of water.

SO, YOU WANT TO BUILD AN INVITING, RESPONSIVE GRANT PROGRAM?

The Design of Black Empowerment Works

The Design of Black Empowerment Works

WHAT WE DID

During the second session of Champions of Change, Brandon Black of Drawnversation created a journey map for us that would go on to drive our entire approach to designing Black Empowerment Works. Based on his graphic, we knew our design would need to address four primary components:

1. Entry and Awareness: How will people hear about the opportunity? What will their first point of engagement look like?
2. Application and Eligibility: How will people express interest in participating? Who is eligible to participate?
3. Selection: How will decisions be made? Who will make those decisions?
4. Post-Selection Support: How will participants be engaged after investment decisions are made?

Taking into consideration the insights we gathered during the discovery phase and feedback at the public event, as well as acknowledging our design constraints (time, capacity, funds, etc.), the Champions landed on this program design for Black Empowerment Works:

PROGRAM DESIGN

Multiple ways to participate

- Grantee
- Reviewer
- Mentor

Robust outreach strategy

- Traditional media
- Social media
- Word of mouth
(connecting with community influencers)

Opportunities to learn more

- Website with detailed content
- Outreach video
- Public information sessions

Simplified application with support

- Open office house + virtual support (phone, email)
- Online application submission only with streamlined questions.
- Check-in calls
- Automated reminders of deadlines

Transparent + equity-focused decision-making

- Diverse reviewer panels
- Calibration and bias training for reviewers
- Written application and interview review
- Rationale provided for all decisions made

Support beyond the grant

- Mentorship and capacity building
- Opportunities to share knowledge with others.

Learning/shaping at each phase

- Feedback gathered from all participants about experience.
- Participants have the opportunity to shape the next round.

The Design of Black Empowerment Works (cont'd.)

MORE DETAILS ABOUT DESIGN COMPONENTS

- Multiple Ways to Participate: When we launched the grant program in February 2020, we went live with three applications: one to be a grantee (open to nonprofits, businesses, community coalitions, and individuals), one to be a reviewer (who would make the grant decisions alongside the Champions), and one to serve as a mentor to the grantees once selected.
- Robust outreach strategy: Several times we heard that a common barrier to applying for grants was not knowing that they were available. To address this, we tapped into different forms of media (with varying levels of success). Social media and word of mouth were our most successful routes.
- Opportunities to learn more: Our website landing page included a full information packet and the applications questions for download, links to sign up for open office hours and information sessions, links to the online application portals, and contact information for additional support. The Champions also created a video, which can be found [here](#).
- Transparent + equity-focused decision-making: Community members were the sole grant decision-makers. To ensure that community volunteers felt equipped for the task, a multi-step training process was built. Beyond just reviewing the grant applications, reviewers would have the opportunity to hold conversations with potential grantees to learn more about their work. At the end, every applicant received feedback. We'll share more about the decision-making process in the next section.

GRANT APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY

Grant applicants had to meet these general eligibility requirements:

- Meet the definition of Black-led.
- Possess at least some of the characteristics of our definition of grassroots.
- Address poverty.
- Not be a currently funded agency partner.
- Be actively involved in your community.
- Apply for work that is feasible and able to produce measurable results during the grant period.
- Have a demonstrated track record of success and/or capacity to carry out the work.

PROGRAM TIMELINE

February 19: Black Empowerment Works application go live.

March 3-14: Public Information Sessions

March 23: Reviewer Application Closes

March 31: Reviewers selected and notified & training begins.

May 1: Grantee applications close

May 5-19: Application review (small group meetings on May 19)

May 20-27: Grantee interviews (small group meetings on May 28)

May 29: Review large-group meeting to determine grantees

June 1: Grant applicants notified

The Design of Black Empowerment Works (cont'd.)

One of our goals was to create a process that ran efficiently and effectively, with a minimal turnaround time for decision-making. Initially, we had the grant application deadline set as April 13 with decisions by May 13. In light of COVID, we reached out to applicants and the majority asked for a small extension of the deadline which we honored.

THE RESULTS

A total of 126 leaders started a grant application, with 95 submitting by the deadline. We received applications representing multiple different organizational structures: nonprofit organizations (44%), for-profits/ social enterprises (32%), individuals (15%), community coalitions (5%), and other (4%). The 95 applications represented a requested investment of \$2.1M. More than 30 community volunteers expressed interest in wanting to serve as reviewers. For both opportunities, social media and word of mouth/direct recommendation to apply were the most common ways people found out about the opportunity. We had over 200 support touchpoints with prospective grantees.

WHAT WORKED WELL FOR US

- **Having a dedicated phone number and email address just for this program.** We anticipated that people would have a lot of questions, and they did. Having a dedicated email box and phone number allowed us the ability to have multiple folks respond to inquiries without anything getting lost.
- **Checking in with prospective grantees to ensure they knew what supports were available to them.** Approximately mid-way through the application window, we called everyone who'd started an application to see how the process

was going and to ask if there was any way we could support them. Several people signed up for open office hours following these calls.

- **Creating a detailed information packet that encompassed information on all three opportunities.** While this didn't mean that people necessarily read through the information, it did enable all of us to give consistent responses to common questions.
- **Shifting to Zoom meeting in lieu of being able to meet face-to-face.** While it wasn't exactly the same, being able to see each other's faces helped to build connection among the group.

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED

- **Infusing more creativity in the design.** What would it look like to not even have an application in the formal sense? What if we hired a team of marketers/marketing coaches to craft narratives for applicants so that even those who aren't selected get a tangible benefit? What could a video submission look like? These and several other ideas were left on the cutting room floor because we didn't give them enough time and intentionality to develop. Next time, we hope to incorporate more non-traditional elements.
- **If continuing with an application, allowing online and paper submissions, or at least providing more support on navigating the online application.** While we included snapshots of the online system navigation in our information package, some applicant still noted that the system was challenging to navigate.
- **Being more clear (or more narrow) about eligibility.** In feedback, specifically from leaders who applied for funds but didn't receive them, this was a common bit of feedback.

The Design of Black Empowerment Works (cont'd.)

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED (cont'd)

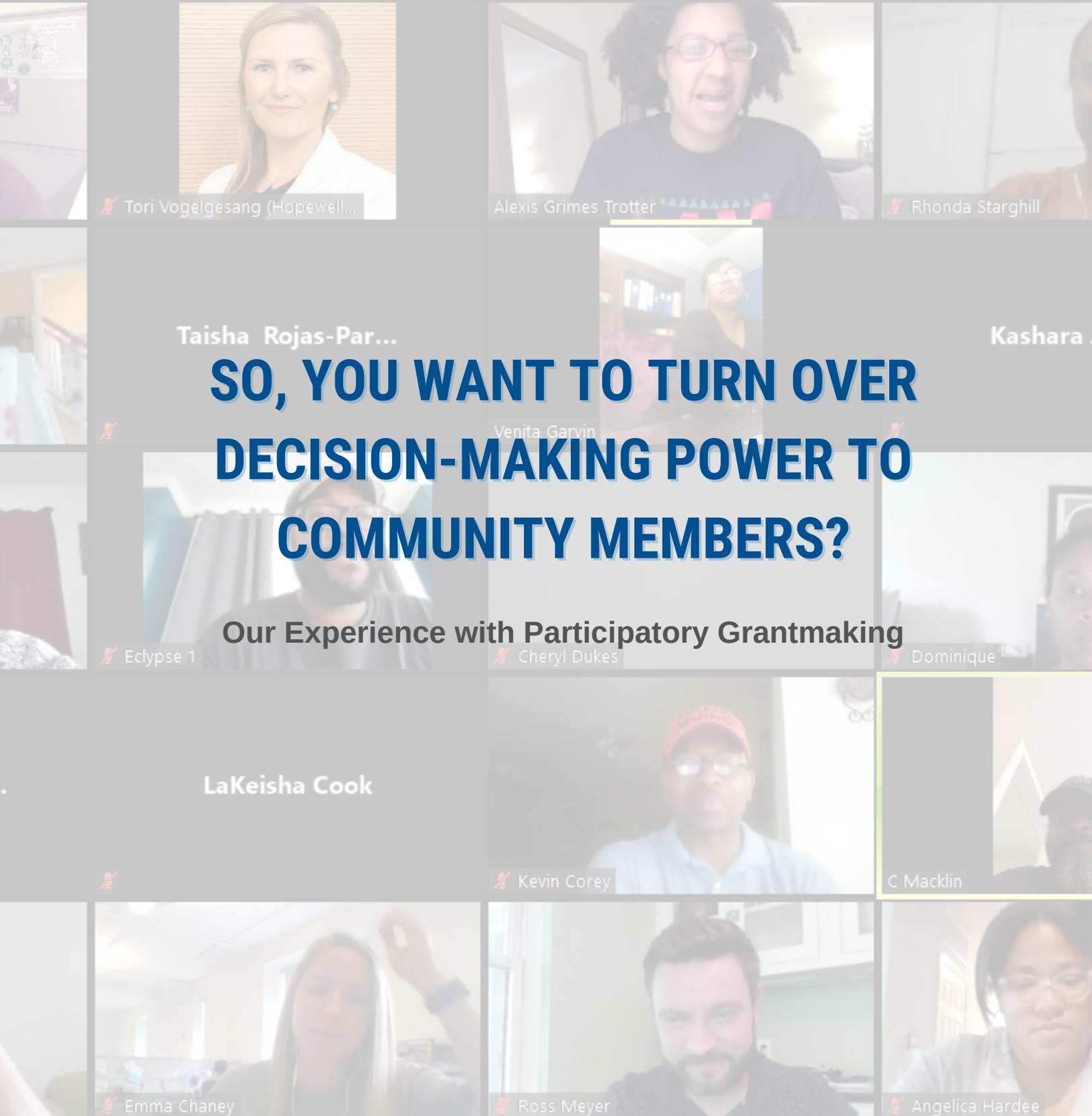
- **Waiting to open the mentor application.** It's hard to attract mentors to support grantees who haven't been selected yet.
- **Building out more of the mentor experience earlier.** We spent the majority of our time building out the grantee and reviewer experience because they were more immediate. As a result, we didn't put nearly enough thought behind the mentor experience. Being able to seamlessly transition into the next phase of the work would have been very beneficial.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- What sort of program do you have the capacity to carry out? Know that there are going to be excellent ideas you aren't going to be able to implement due to capacity limitations.
- What sorts of feedback opportunities can you build into your design? Include them.



Pictured: A Champion leading a public information session at BlaCk Coffee Lounge



Tori Vogelgesang (Hopewell...)

Alexis Grimes Trotter

Rhonda Starghill

Taisha Rojas-Par...

Kashara

SO, YOU WANT TO TURN OVER DECISION-MAKING POWER TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS?

Venita Garvin

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking

Eclipse 1

Cheryl Dukes

Dominique

LaKeisha Cook

Kevin Corey

C Macklin

Emma Chaney

Ross Meyer

Angelica Hardee

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking

WHAT WE DID

On our launch date, we released three applications: grantee, reviewer, and mentor. Much like the design of the original Champions application, the reviewer application included demographic, experience, capacity and vision questions. Also similarly, we looked to select reviewers who would apply different lenses to the work based on their experiences and backgrounds.

In line with our commitment to transferring power, a small team of Champions selected the reviewers, making decisions based on a common rubric. Ultimately, they chose 25 community reviewers who would join a team of nine Champions to make selection decisions (in the end, we had 23 community reviewers and seven Champions, making an even team of 30). Each reviewer committed to spending approximately 21 hours across one and a half months to meet the needs of the program.

To make decisions, reviewers would be separated into teams of three reviewing the same set of applications. Review teams would be selected based on diversity of perspective and availability. Following an independent review and evaluation of applications using a common rubric, reviewers would meet in their small teams for the first time to discuss the applications and determine which applicants they would like to interview to receive further information on their idea. Following the interviews, reviewers would have one final small-team discussion about their pool of applications, ranking them in order of who they'd most like to fund. Taking the teams ratings, a series of funding scenarios were created. At a large group final decision-making meeting, reviewers discussed all of the funding scenarios and selected the one they wanted to move forward with.

Training (April 11 – 23, 2020)

Following a series of informal coffee chats we held to get to know our community reviewers, we dove into the training. Training of reviewers was a critical step for several reasons:

- Decision-making would be collaborative, so we needed to ensure that everyone understood timelines and responsibilities.
- We would be using an online system not likely to be familiar to any of the reviewers.
- The community volunteers outnumbered the Champions, but would be responsible for carrying out the vision of the group.
- We needed to name how bias often-times shows up in decision-making process and provide strategies to call it out and overcome it.

Our training consisted of two components: a series of self-guided trainings to build foundational knowledge and one live training to reinforce and build on the knowledge gained through the self-guided training. Our self-guided training series included information on how to log into the system, the basics of the grant program, the steps to reviewing applications, and the impact of bias in decision-making. Each part of the self-guided training included an activity, so we would be able to track progress and understanding. At the end of the self-guided training, reviewers got to practice reviewing and evaluating an application. At the end of the live training, reviewers discussed their evaluations, modeling the experience they would take part in once they got their actual applications.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking (cont'd)

BLACK EMPOWERMENT WORKS REVIEWER TIME COMMITMENT OVERVIEW

Activity (Approximate no. of hours)

- Training (3.00)
- Independent application review (8.00)
- Small groups meetings (2.50)
- Interviews with potential grantees (7.00)
- Large group final decision-making meeting (1.25)

Total Hours 21.75

Creating review teams and assigning applications (May 1 – May 5, 2020)

We wanted to ensure that at least three people read each application, so a team-based model made the most sense. We wanted our review teams to be diverse (demographically, and based on experience), with each team reviewing a diverse group of applications (based on organization type, focus area, and alignment to the eligibility requirements). This meant we would have quite a bit of behind-the-scenes work to do.

Following the live training, we asked reviewers to submit their availability (based on a slate of options we provided) for small group meetings, interviews, and a large-team discussion. Once the grant applications closed on May 1, we used the grantee information to create a conflict of interest disclosure document, so that we could ensure that reviewers wouldn't read applications from people/organizations with whom they have a relationship. At the same time, the applications were quickly scanned and categorized. With availability information, conflict of interest documents, grantee and review information in hand, the teams were established. Since we received 95 applications, we created 10 review teams.

Independent application review (May 5 – May 18, 2020)

Each team was assigned 9-10 applications. Reviewers were instructed to review the applications independently, providing a preliminary score of the application and lifting up any critical questions they had for grantees. In preparation for the first small team meeting, individual preliminary scores and desire for interviews were pulled together into a small team-specific spreadsheet to guide the discussion.

Small team preliminary recommendation meeting (May 19, 2020)

The primary goals of the small team preliminary recommendation meeting were to: (1) share comments and preliminary scores for the reviewed grant applications, (2) land on a preliminary consensus score for the reviewed application, (3) identify the applicants the group will interview and the questions to ask, and (4) finalize interview availability of the team. Meetings took place via Zoom. Participants in these meetings were the reviewers and a facilitator (who was responsible to documenting the conversation and ensuring all voices are heard).

At the end of these meetings, we had a list of applicants to schedule for interviews and questions for them.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking

(cont'd)

Interviews (May 20 – 27, 2020)

A total of 56 organizations were selected for interviews, with targeted questions for each based on their application. To schedule interviews, we sent individual emails out to the applicants indicating the purpose of the interview, the specific questions for them, plus a link to sign up for an interview slot (each review team had a customized sign-up page). Once an applicant signed up for a slot, calendar invitations were sent out to all the necessary participants.

The interviews followed a common format:

- Welcome and introductions (5 min)
- Applicant showcase, or time for the applicant to share whatever they'd like in what ever format they choose (7 min)
- Reviewer questions and answers, including two standard questions and up to three applicant-specific questions (25 min)
- Applicant questions and closing (10 min)

At least one reviewer committed to taking notes during the interviews. At the conclusion of their team's interviews, reviewers were asked to submit another round of independent scores, plus their ranking of the applicants.

Final small team recommendation meeting (May 28, 2020)

The primary goals of this meeting were to: (1) come to a final consensus score based on the applications and any interviews, and (2) land on a consensus ranking for applicants. Like the first small team meeting, reviewers and a facilitator attended, with the facilitator documenting the discussion and decisions made.

At the conclusion of the meeting, facilitators submitted the final scores and rankings and worked to create individual feedback paragraphs for each of the applications reviewed by their team. Based on the requested funds from the top organizations selected and the amount we had to grant out, staff created different funding scenarios and sent them over to the reviewers in preparation for the large group meeting.

Large group final decision-making meeting (May 29, 2020)

For the first time, we brought all of the reviewers together to (1) present a snapshot of the portfolio, with a focus on the top choices, (2) present the funding scenarios and select the preferred scenario, and (3) celebrate the process. We presented four different funding scenarios and then gave them time to discuss the merits and drawbacks of each in small groups. Following the small group discussions, we pulled everyone back together for a vote. While there was a clear preferred funding scenario, the vote was not unanimous, so we took time to discuss. In the end, all agreed to move forward with the funding scenario selected, which would provide partial funding to the top three applicants from each review team.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking (cont'd)

Communication of funding decisions (June 1, 2020)

We committed to communicating with all grant applicants on June 1. Between May 29 and June 1, the small team facilitators worked to refine the feedback paragraphs that would be sent to applicants, whether or not they were funded. One of the Champions took the lead on crafting the template letters for the selected and not-selected applicants. We used the mail merge feature in Microsoft Word to customize the letters.

And then something happened. Right before we went to hit “send” on the emails, we were informed that the United Way leadership team had a discussion and made the decision to transfer some of our unrestricted funds over to the project so that the selected applicants would receive their full requested funding amounts. This equated to a doubling of the funding pool, from \$300,000 to \$600,544. This would mean that the applicants would be better supported to carry out their programs as outlined in their applications.

For the funded programs, we sent over partnership documents, forms to fill out, and requested they schedule a video meeting to talk through what the year will look like together. For those we weren’t able to fund, we offered them an opportunity to schedule a conversation to talk more about how the funding decisions were made and provide additional feedback. Both groups (along with the reviewers) were asked to complete a feedback survey about their experience.

On June 18, 2020 we publicly announced the first class of Black Empowerment Works grantees.



Pictured: Social media announcement image

THE RESULTS

28 Black-led efforts received funding. We were able to invest in nonprofit organizations, for profit social enterprise, and individuals. For some, this was the first grant they’d ever received. While all of the funds used to support the program were from pre-existing sources, several individuals and organizations have committed additional funds, showing us that there is an appetite for this kind of work.

Reviewers had a positive experience. The averaged overall experience score of reviewers was 9.2 stars out of a total of 10. Most indicated that while the timeline was aggressive, they didn’t feel rushed.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking (cont'd)

Reviewer Feedback Survey: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, what are your reactions to the following statements?	
Statement	Avg. Score
Throughout the process, my perspectives and recommendations were recognized, considered, and valued.	4.7
The training provided adequately prepared me for my role as a reviewer.	4.5
The review process was straightforward and accessible.	4.6
The interviews served as a valuable touchpoint in making decisions regarding applications.	4.9
I fully stand behind the decisions we made as a small review team, and how we made those decisions.	4.7
Addressing and overcoming bias in decision-making was a common conversation among my review team.	3.8
If presented the opportunity, I would sign up to be a reviewer again.	4.8
The experience met the expectations I held coming into the process.	4.5

The reviewers also provided a wealth of feedback on what elements of the experience we should keep for future processes, and recommendations on what we could improve.

While a significantly smaller group of grant applicants – those that were selected and not selected – completed the feedback survey, here were some of their perspectives.

Grant Applicant Feedback Survey: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, what are your reactions to the following statements?		
Statement	Avg. Score Not Selected	Avg. Score Selected
The application questions were straightforward and clear.	4.1	4.8
The definitions of “Black-led”, “grassroots-generated”, and “addressing poverty” were clear.	3.6	4.8
Throughout the process, I knew how to access help/support if I needed it.	4.1	4.8
The application process and experience looked and felt different from other processes.	3.8	4
Receiving feedback on my application was helpful, appreciated.	3.8	4.8
I understand how decisions were made throughout the process.	2.9	4.8
Final decisions aside, this process met my expectations.	3.4	4.8

We intentionally requested feedback from both groups, recognizing that the responses would likely be different. Like the reviewers, grant applicants provided a wealth of feedback on what elements of the program we should keep for future years, and which we should change.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking (cont'd)

WHAT WORKED WELL FOR US

- **Reviewing in small groups.** This allowed for each application to get more attention, without overburdening the reviewers. Though it was imperfect, it was the best option.
- **Engaging additional United Way team members in the process.** There had been a small core team of folks working directly with the Champions on the project. Opening more opportunities for staff members to closely engage in the process helped to build more internal champions for the work while also expanding capacity. Roles including delivering content at trainings, serving as small team facilitators, helping to coordinate interviews, and even serving as a control group members to see if staff and volunteers would make different investment decisions (which, in some cases, they did). This engagement was one of the factors that contributed to securing additional funds – leadership team members got the opportunity to take part in the process, and thus advocated for it.
- **Leveraging technology to create a more efficient process.** We used Zoom to record trainings and conduct interview, Signup Genius for grant applicants to schedule for interviews, our online grants management system (e-CImpact) to not only house the grant applications but to also assign applications to reviewers and capture their feedback, and communication tools (phone calls, texts, and emails) to keep everyone up-to-date. Without these tools, the process would have been a confusing mess.

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED

- **Interviewing ALL of the applicants, and better equipping reviewers to carry out the interviews.** We communicated to reviewers that they should interview applicants whom they had additional questions for that could influence their final rating. In several instances, and interview resulted in an increased score for applicants. Moving forward, we should consider building out more time for reviewers to interview everyone in their pool.
- **Being more transparent about the decision-making process with grantees earlier.** While we did include high-level evaluation criteria in the information package, we could have included the rubric and details of the process to increase transparency and trust in how decisions were made.
- **Clarifying the purpose of interview upfront.** If a review team didn't have a question for an applicant that could impact their final rating, they didn't interview them. In some instances, that meant highly rated applicants didn't get an interview. Several grant applicants (rightfully) assumed that the interview was the second phase of the process, and thus not getting an interview meant they were not moving forward. After receiving a few discouraged emails from grant applicants, we sent out an email clarifying the purpose. On the other side, reviewers expressed confusion around who they should and shouldn't interview. We could have increased the training on this piece of the process.

Our Experience with Participatory Grantmaking (cont'd)

WHAT WE COULD HAVE IMPROVED (cont'd)

- **Identifying “content experts” to support the review process, provide additional input to reviewers.** While we 100% stand behind the decision to turn over all decision-making power to the community, this meant that some reviewers were tasked with reviewing applications in focus areas for which they had limited to no expertise. Creating a core team of “content experts” to review applications in their given sector and serve as consultants to the review teams (but still not decision-makers) could have been beneficial.
- **Providing an overview of all of the applicants to the reviewers upfront.** We could have provided more information about the overall portfolio of applicants, including short descriptions of each, to provide additional context to their decision-making.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Are you equipped to receive critical feedback? If not, you probably should not pursue this type of process.
- How do you plan to source funds to carry out this work? We recommend having at least a small pool earmarked for the program upfront to ensure you have some dollars to give out.

A woman with grey hair, wearing a black top and pants, sits on a folding chair, smiling and talking to two young girls. The girls are sitting on the floor, wearing white lace dresses and holding large black pom-poms. The room has a pink wall, a mirror reflecting the woman, and colorful streamers hanging from the ceiling. The text "CONCLUSIONS + WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?" is overlaid in the center.

**CONCLUSIONS +
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

Conclusions + What Happens Next?

We set out some basic success measures for the project at the beginning, and we met or are on track to meet them.

Measures met

- Champions of Change fully designed and operated a grant program, investing in at least three promising ideas aligned to United Way of Greater Cincinnati strategy areas.
- Strategies of participatory grantmaking were tested.
- United Way leadership were actively engaged throughout the Champions of Change/Black Empowerment Works journey.
- A case study was created to detail the process, learnings, and outcomes of the journey (this is that case study!).
- Champions of Change were leveraged as storytellers and recognized as experts, having the space to both teach and learn. Partial funding has been secured/earmarked to run a second round of Black Empowerment Works.

Measurements on track to meet

- At least five additional resources outside of funding are leveraged to support grantees.
- Through investing and mobilizing resources, capacity is increased in grantees leading to increases in measurable outcomes.
- Feedback from participants will shape the next round.

Our immediate goal is to learn while doing, and we are certainly doing that. We will continue to bring community leaders into our work. We will continue to build out the resources and capacity support for Black Empowerment Works grantees. We will run future cycles of the grant program. We will address other challenges of equity. But the work doesn't stop here.

Our longer-term goal is to transfer the learnings from this body of work to transform our work as an organization. To shape our organization so that these smaller programs no longer HAVE to exist. We look forward to sharing our progress with you. We hope you'll carry on their work as well.

RECOMMENDED READINGS + RESOURCES

Recommended Readings + Resources

Reports

Black-led Social Change Cincinnati Report, United Way of Greater Cincinnati (2018) - [link](#)

The Case for Funding Black-led Social Change, Black Social Change Funders Network (2019) - [link](#)

Moving Rooms of Power: Participatory Philanthropy is Gaining More Traction, Inside Philanthropy (2020) - [link](#)

Follow the Leader: A Philanthropic Strategy for Effectiveness, Deaconess Foundation (2018) - [link](#)

Grantmaking with a Racial Equity Lens, Grantcraft (2018) - [link](#)

Metathemes: Designing for Equitable Social Change, Design Impact (2016) - [link](#)

Other Resources

Trust-Based Philanthropy Project - [link](#)

ABFE: A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities - [link](#)