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Decentralize Your Dollars: Incorporating Participatory Grant Making into Resource Allocation Decisions

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Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful for many mentors in this work, including our fellow practitioners, colleagues, funders, and especially the participants in our shared gifting circles.

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Abstract. Participatory grant making is a concept that can support decentralized decision making, shared power, and racial equity in Extension programming. The underlying philosophy of participatory grant making is to empower individuals and communities with flexibility and support to make collective decisions about financial resources. In this article, we draw on our experiences and provide concrete examples to demonstrate the power of this model for improving Extension programming and internal procedures. We conclude that the concept could be adapted for an array of financial decision-making settings to help Extension stay relevant and rooted in the communities we serve.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory grant making is a style of allocating resources that emphasizes decentralized decision making by those receiving funds (Gibson, 2017). By shifting power from the grantor to the grantee, models such as shared gifting can cultivate innovation, collaboration, and learning in a way that is distinct from traditional philanthropic approaches (Buhles, 2017, 2019). Extension can benefit from learning about participatory grant-making models because these approaches can be applied in a range of settings to advance our organizational values of education, engagement, and equity.

EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATORY GRANT MAKING

A first step toward participatory resource allocation is to incorporate collaborative decision-making practices. This can mean being more inclusive in determining who will play a role in grant review committees or make decisions about program budgets. Often, these decisions are made by “experts” or people who hold power within organizational hierarchies (Campbell, 2018). Increasingly, state agencies and organizations are inviting community partners and staff with direct ties to community members to be involved in these decisions (Gibson, 2017). At the University of Minnesota Extension, we executed collaborative decision making in 2016 through a grant-making project in which local nutrition educators brainstormed ideas for working collaboratively across a region. Through this process, the educators collectively funded an initiative to provide regional support to several communities to implement a “One Vegetable, One Community” campaign, which has continued to be a popular program in northern Minnesota (University of Minnesota Extension, 2018).

Another way of implementing participatory grant making is through democratic voting. In 2016, we organized a statewide convention of food network leaders. Attendees were eligible to apply for \$10,000 in capacity-building funds. During the convening, participants discussed outcomes their networks could achieve at different funding levels, then voted to determine that the funds would be split into six \$500 grants, three \$1,000 grants, and two \$2,000 grants. Network leaders then had approximately one month to submit proposals for one or more funding levels. We received a total of 22 proposals, including collaborative projects that involved multiple networks working together. Using an online voting system, each network was eligible to cast one vote. This approach resulted in networks gleaning ideas and building relationships with one another during both the grant development and awarding processes.

A shared gifting circle is a process based on the philosophy of handing off the decision-making power entirely to community-based organizations seeking funds. This model allows grantees to decide who gets how much funding through a process of pitching ideas to one another and making individual decisions about funding amounts awarded to each participant (Buhles, 2017). At the beginning of the process, grantees receive equal amounts of funding, of which they get to keep a portion (usually about 20%) and “gift” the rest. We have facilitated five shared gifting circles to date and have conducted post-circle evaluations that consistently point to the transformative power of decentralized financial decision making and peer affirmations.

For example, through our Action Learning Seed Fund (ALSF) we have provided a total of \$50,000 to 14 organizations and individuals seeking to build more power for communities of color through food systems change (University of Minnesota, 2020). We have been intentional about inviting and funding grantees who were more likely to have experienced racial exclusion in previous efforts to secure funds, using tools like the Equity-Based Decision-Making Tree to hold ourselves accountable (Bain et al., 2020). In post-evaluations, ALSF participants most valued the connections they made with one another and opportunity to explore collaborative work. Secondly, ALSF participants appreciated the flexible funding to support their individual projects.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXTENSION

These participatory resource-allocation strategies can be used in Extension when we have funds to award or subcontract to external organizations. In our health and nutrition program area, we have used a combination of program income and federal grant funding to support each form of participatory grant making that we have implemented. We have also consulted with other organizations and state agencies to implement or explore participatory grant making. We have led shared gifting “simulations” at conference workshops and in one national webinar (Chesapeake Foodshed Network, 2019), during which participants experience shared gifting without real funds at stake. These simulations have resulted in at least three groups deciding to move forward with a shared gifting circle of their own.

Participatory grant making can also be used to support internal initiatives, especially when interdisciplinary work requires the use of shared resources (Holland et al., 2019). We have brought together teams from across Extension program areas for a shared gifting circle to advance multi-layered, equity-based food system work. Extension staff identified that the gifting process helped them feel more invested in each other’s work and demonstrated a greater understanding of the difference between equity and equality in decision making.

Another internal shared gifting circle similarly influenced those involved, with one team member reflecting, “Receiving a \$3,000 grant in the circle meant more to me than a \$3 million grant from the National Institute of Health because it was given by my peers.” In summary, participatory grant making is significant to Extension because it is an approach that can be adapted in a multitude of ways to help advance our mission of education through peer-to-peer learning, as well as our mission to efficiently and equitably direct university resources to the communities that we serve.

CONCLUSION

Participatory grant making shifts the way that universities work with communities as agents of change rather than beneficiaries of university knowledge. This pivot is critical during this time of increased awareness of social injustices and can be part of a response to calls on Extension to consider how our programs can better reflect racial equity in decision making. Whether or not grant making is part of your program portfolio, there are many ways the philosophy can be applied more broadly to Extension work. From program direction to project budgets and from grant proposals to review committees, participatory grant-making methods and other decentralized resource allocation strategies could help you take concrete steps to support a more democratic distribution of power and resources in Extension programs.

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Decentralize Your Dollars: Incorporating Participatory Grant Making into Resource Allocation

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