

# NORTH CAROLINA COLLABORATIVE FOR STRONG LATINX COMMUNITIES

## ***Somos Bien Verdes: Lessons in Participatory Grantmaking for NC's Latinx Communities***

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### **CONTEXT:**

We are living in a time when it seems that our entire world is going through a process of awakening and assessment. Our false sense of individualistic comfort and security have been challenged in heartbreaking ways and we can no longer afford to hold on to the notion that we are not intimately interconnected. Many of us are realizing that our seemingly singular actions actually have significant impacts on the whole, and that our choices have ripple effects far beyond our immediate vicinity.

The philanthropic sector has also been waking up from a haze of complacency and comfort, moving towards the realization that perhaps they too have been complicit in exacerbating the inequities that they are so invested in remedying (supposedly). Those of us involved in the work of social justice understand that there is a significant distance between professing values of equity and actually living into these aspirations. We spend our adult lives learning that although the arc may bend toward justice, the trajectory to get us there requires a combination of commitment, practice and perseverance that leaves the faint-hearted by the wayside.

Yet in the midst of all of this upheaval and uncertainty, there are slivers of light that merit (and require) celebration. Such is the story of the North Carolina Collaborative for Strong Latinx Communities (NCCSLC) and their journey towards dismantling antiquated and unnecessary hierarchies of power.

### **DISCLOSURE:**

I'll admit that I am not at all unbiased in telling this story and I am far from neutral. I have a very clear agenda<sup>1</sup> and have every intention of using my skills and energy to decolonize my own being, and to inspire others to consider doing the same. I have the honor of serving as Project Manager with the NCCSLC for the last 2 and a half years. I've helped these folks refine a beautiful vision and move an idea into fruition. This has been my return to working directly in support of NC's Latinx community, something

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.libelulaconsulting.com/post/what-i-stand-for>

I had devoted a good portion of my career to at different times. This work aligns well with my purpose in life and I am proud to say that I am heavily invested.

## ORIGINS STORY:

In 2018, a group of North Carolina funders engaged in a planning process that established local control of the Funders' Collaborative which had previously operated under the umbrella of Hispanics in Philanthropy. This group of foundations, who had already made significant investments in the flourishing of NC's Latinx communities, wanted to continue collaborating to more intentionally and equitably direct their resources. Thus, the NC Collaborative for Strong Latinx Communities was born.

## THE PEOPLE:

This work has been championed, supported and funded by a small group of very dedicated women and 11 Latinx leaders from across the state<sup>2</sup>. Without their commitment and follow through all of this would still be a novel, perhaps admirable, but unfunded and unfulfilled idea. The Latinx leaders selected to serve on the Unifying Council (what the NCCSLC called the grants decision-making body) represented all 3 regions of the state, well-established nonprofits as well as grassroots groups, and a wide range of ages and backgrounds. The Unifying Council also included three foundation representatives, all women of color.

The Unifying Council had full decision-making power for the grant process. Starting in the summer of 2020, this group convened several times to clarify scope of work and process, articulate group agreements, review grant applications and ultimately make decisions on which organizations would receive funding.

*This process was very important to the Latinx leaders that participated because for many years they had been asking to be part of a decision-making process that is usually led by foundations. These leaders are closer to the impacted communities and many are part of them, which is why they have a greater understanding of the needs, priorities, and solutions to problems of the Latinx community. Most had never been in the funding decision-making role. The leaders recognized the efforts of the foundations to finally listen to their recommendations and to be included in this process and they appreciate the space that was created. One participant reflected on this reality: "Finally, a process was done that included us as a community and it must be repeated, we hope it's not something they do once."<sup>3</sup>*

## FROM TALKING EQUITY TO LIVING EQUITY:

Equity was one of the values this group had professed for its work, and participatory grantmaking was a concept they were interested in exploring for their work together. Though the group wasn't yet totally clear what this participatory grantmaking actually entailed, their trust in each other and in the deep wisdom they had witnessed over the years in NC's Latinx communities compelled them forward. They also understood that if they were going to espouse a framework that upheld the motto "nothing about us without us"<sup>4</sup> they needed to invite the leadership of Latinx leaders early on in their visioning and design process.

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<sup>2</sup> List of steering committee can be found here: <https://nclatinxcollaborative.org/>

<sup>3</sup> This excerpt comes from a story-capturing/telling report written by independent consultant, Yazmin Garcia Rico.

<sup>4</sup> This motto used by the disability justice movement has also been key in helping philanthropic institutions understand the importance of putting those most directly impacted front and center in decision-making about how resources will be directed to benefit their communities. See: ["Nothing About Us Without Us"--Mantra for a Movement](#)

To this end, they hired Latinx consultants or firms<sup>5</sup> to help them understand the evolving landscape of Latinx-serving organizations across NC and to help clarify the unique role they could play as funders in creating avenues to bolster these organizations and the communities they served. It took over two years of research, listening, relationship building, and clarifying but in 2020, the NCCSLC established a fund of \$2 million from 8 NC-based foundations with a national match from Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. The aspiration and intent for this fund was to move decision-making power from the hands of foundation staff into the hands of Latinx leaders so that they could determine how this money should be directed. Participatory grantmaking would become the vehicle that enabled them to do this.

## **PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING AS DISRUPTION:**

In the 20+ years I've been working in, with and for nonprofits and foundations I've come to realize that good intentions can only carry us so far. The "savior/charity" model of traditional philanthropy is far too pervasive and often seductive in its ability to offer a veneer of doing good while still continuing to prop up and perpetuate unjust systems. This moment in our human existence is requiring us to move from good intentions to conscious action. More than that, it is compelling foundation staff, leaders and trustees that have expressed a commitment to equity to back up their words with some real follow-through. The time for "performative wokeness"<sup>6</sup> has come and gone. What is required of us now is full-hearted, unabashed courage to challenge and dismantle anything that prevents our collective flourishing.

Participatory grantmaking by definition "cedes decision-making power about funding--including the strategy and criteria behind those decisions--to the very communities that funders aim to serve."<sup>7</sup> Put simply, participatory grantmaking "is a lever for disrupting and democratizing philanthropy." Although North Carolina is proud to be home to several progressive and/or social justice oriented foundations who have done a good share of their work in the sphere of equity, very few of these foundations had made any significant moves towards democratizing the grantmaking process. For many of the foundations involved in the NCCSLC, this represented one of the first explorations of this vehicle for operationalizing equity. This would serve as an experiment of sorts, one that could potentially inform how grantmaking was made in other arenas of their work.

## **THE PANDEMIC THAT CHANGED OUR WORLD:**

In the spring of 2020, our world came to a halt. There wasn't a process, timeline, calendar, vision or plan that wasn't dramatically altered by the Coronavirus pandemic. The work that we had laid out for ourselves was momentarily derailed. Having already harnessed the majority of financial commitments for the NCCSLC, the steering committee made a unanimous decision to move a portion of these funds to serve as Rapid Response COVID-19 Support. This was not the participatory grantmaking process we had been dreaming up, but we knew that many of NC's Latinx communities were in need and that emergency support could help ease a bit of the pain.

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<sup>5</sup> The NCCSLC is grateful to the wisdom and guidance it received throughout its formation from: Marisol Jimenez of [Tepeyac Consulting](#), [Althea Gonzalez](#), Craig White and Yazmin Garcia Rico.

<sup>6</sup> I first heard this term used by the brilliant Sheryl Petty on a CoCreative webinar she led on March 3, 2020 on Systems Change and Deep Equity.

<sup>7</sup> From "[Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking](#)", published by GrantCraft.

Yet the work was not derailed completely. We understood that the need for multi-year general operating support would be more valuable than ever for many of these groups committed to serving and supporting Latinx communities across our state. We took a momentary pause to consult directly with the Latinx leaders that had been informing the contours of this work and asked them if and how we should move forward. The resounding response was that the work should proceed, and although it would be an expedited and virtual version of our plan, this was far too important an opportunity to pass by.

## LESSONS IN PROGRESS:

In January 2021 the NCCSLC was proud to announce its first cohort of grantees of Latinx-led organizations. Of the 126 organizations that applied for this grant funding, a group of 29 organizations was selected, representing a wide array of approaches and geographic areas. Though groups and organizations selected are as diverse as the communities they represent, they all share a common goal of working diligently to strengthen and amplify the well-being of NC's Latinx population. The 29 groups selected will receive 2-year general operating support to fuel the work that they are doing across the state. Given the disparate impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on Latinx communities, these resources will serve as affirmation for groups already exemplifying a deep commitment to justice and power-building.

While we are still young in our exploration of participatory grantmaking, the experience thus far has gifted us with valuable insights and lessons worth sharing.

- ***Emerge, Adapt and Flex:*** Taking something from idea to fruition is a messy, convoluted, complex, disorienting, exhilarating, and humbling experience. Doing so when society as we've known it begins to unravel, requires a new level of courage. Among all of the shifting tides and new demands for how we engage each other and the world, our touchstone continues to be doing right by the communities we love, and leaning into their inherent wisdom.
- ***Relationships Are Everything:*** Relationships have meant everything to this process--the pre-existing ones, the burgeoning ones, the ones among funders, the ones I brought with me as project manager, and as a Latinx leader in our state. Rev. Jennifer Bailey states that *"relationships move at the speed of trust, but social change moves at the speed of relationships."* This has definitely been proven true throughout this process. Without the depth of relationships that exist because of the 20+ year trajectory of immigrant justice building that exists in North Carolina, none of this work would have been possible.
- ***Relationships Are Everything, The Sequel:*** As would be expected with any group of humans, pre-existing relationships also often means pre-existing conflict, ego-related drama and turf issues. Having a clear sense of the importance of the purpose of our work, and an understanding that the impact of this work rippled far beyond us served to recenter us, over and over again. We were encouraged to step outside of our comfort zones, challenging ourselves to move beyond our individual egos, giving each other the benefit of the doubt whenever possible. Learning to distinguish *"I don't like"* from *"I have a significant objection"* is not easy work but became part of our path forward. Admitting and owning our mistakes openly, quickly and with integrity was essential for a healthy collective process.
- ***Individualism Ruins a Democratic Process:*** In early 2021 we were able to witness a grotesque and sobering example of what happens when individualism reigns supreme. Although our experience was much more localized and fortunately free of violence, we also had to contend

with issues emerging from our individual relationships to power. We are learning that although individual and collective power are intimately tied together, individual needs or agendas can often get in the way of the collective good. We are coming to terms with these concepts as a society and these small opportunities to understand this more intimately become essential exercises that inch us closer to transformation and liberation.

- ***Diversity and Inclusion as Action Verbs:*** In selecting our Unifying Council we made sure to include a wide range of ages as well as including a number of grassroots leaders. Centering the voices of the folks carrying the heaviest burdens of injustice requires us to look more closely at how our ‘business as usual’ so often excludes and perpetuates unnecessary hierarchies of power. Creating a learning space that was warm and welcoming to a variety of learning styles and life experiences meant that more time was needed for: individual check-ins, phone calls, providing paper copies, making instructional videos that made a complicated process easier to understand and engage. This was time consuming and worth every minute.
- ***There is No Time To Rush:*** Like many other community-oriented groups we were struggling with responding to the urgency of the moment, and providing much needed financial resources to organizations while also giving this process the time it required to flourish. The process we engaged in felt rushed, because it was. We made it our goal to try to culminate the 5-month process by December so as to disburse grant checks in January. While we were able to get resources into the hands of 29 organizations across our state at a time of high need, we also acknowledge that our process could have been all the more rich and rewarding had we been able to slow down our pace. Fortunately, the Unifying Council will continue to work together in the coming year, affording us all an opportunity to continue deepening knowledge, relationships and trust.

## **FORWARD TOGETHER, NOT ONE STEP BACK**

As one of the Latinx leaders involved in this process reflecting on his experience said, “somos bien verdes” which translates to “we are very green”. Being new on a learning journey also affords us with a fresh perspective, invigorated energy and vigor to co-create changes that will help philanthropy move away from entrenchment and stagnation. Our hope is that the openings created by the Coronavirus pandemic and the righteous racial uprisings across our country can have a lasting impact on the philanthropic sector, perhaps harkening a new definition of ‘business as usual’.

As I look back on what this year of work meant for me, I am transported to the early days of the Historic Thousands on Jones Street Movement in North Carolina led by Reverend William Barber II (among many others). One of the powerful chants we would proclaim together was “forward together, not one step back.” May this small experiment in participatory grantmaking help fuel a movement towards trust-based philanthropy. May we all continue to lean on the deep wisdom that comes from the margins--from the people who know viscerally what it means to come together to focus on the greater good.

## **APPRECIATIONS:**

This work would not have been possible for the NCCSLC without the support of our Steering Committee, our Unifying Council and our committed funders. We are also deeply grateful to the folks who shared their wisdom and time to help shape our framework and process:

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