

Growing Community Through Participatory Grantmaking: Perspectives on Piloting an Equity-Driven Granting Scheme With Community Gardens in Rural North Carolina

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Abstract

There is a range of approaches to ceding decision-making power and financial authority in collaborations between communities and academic institutions. One method is participatory grantmaking, defined as a form of granting that decentralizes decision-making by involving the community in funding decisions. Each participatory grantmaking process requires deliberate planning to prioritize the expertise and abilities of the potential grantees. This manuscript details our team's journey in designing and moderating a form of participatory grantmaking called network voting within an established group of community-based partners. Through process evaluation, we identify lessons learned and discuss opportunities to amend our process to inform future rounds as we continue to design granting schemes that prioritize the voice of those invited to apply.

Employing anti-racist, equity-driven strategies when collaborating with community to manage and support community-based initiatives requires a deliberate and holistic approach. Longstanding histories of disinvestment, neglect, and even exploitation in community-university partnerships have enforced uneven power dynamics and deprioritized community inclusion and voice (Adabanya et al., 2023; Bergstrom et al., 2014). Initiatives that are intended to serve community needs but are not informed by community voice and decision-making are less likely to result in sustainable changes and improved community health outcomes (Adabanya et al., 2023). The same can be said for grantmaking processes (Albright, 2016; Enright & Bourns, 2010; Parks, 2021).

Grantmaking entities exist to address gaps left by federal programs and the marketplace, yet they tend to employ traditional decision-making structures that predefine the appropriate attributes of the applicant pool and restrict funding amounts and allowable uses (Leat et al., 2017; Mitchell & Calabrese, 2023). Traditionally, an uneven power dynamic between the party providing funding and the party requesting funding is the norm (Berzin et al., 2016; Gregory & Howard, 2009). The funder holds the power in this model that resembles "gift giving," starting with a standardized application process that may require lengthy technical writing and ending with a behind-closed-doors decision-making process, often with little feedback provided to applicants who are not

ultimately selected (Enright & Bourns, 2010; Leat et al., 2017; Ni, 2007). In dictating the application process, funders determine the considerations or characteristics of prospective applicants most suited to apply (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2023). The restrictive nature of traditional grantmaking does not align with the flexibility needed to encourage underserved and marginalized communities to participate, yet efforts to start and sustain community-based programming rely heavily on grants (Leat et al., 2017; Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). Compared to well-resourced groups, underserved and marginalized communities face geographic, technological, financial, educational, informational, psychological, and infrastructural vulnerabilities (Potnis & Gala, 2020). These vulnerabilities result in reliance on grant funding for program feasibility and operation yet also hinder successful participation in traditional granting schemes (Gregory & Howard, 2009; Ni, 2007). By not intentionally considering and accounting for such vulnerabilities, the traditional granting process advantages some applicants and disadvantages others, allowing structural bias to persist (Dean-Coffey, 2018).

In traditional grantmaking processes, decision-makers often have insufficient connection or access to the lived experiences of the people they seek to benefit (Enright & Bourns, 2010). That reality often results in diminished quality, credibility, and authenticity in their approach to making granting decisions and the resultant

impact (Gibson, 2017). Decision-makers make funding decisions based on the information provided; since it is impossible to fully convey the extent of situational context through the medium of traditional grant applications, those most familiar with the nature of the proposed programs and the contexts in which they function are best primed to understand the requests and make appropriate funding decisions (Joseph et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2021). For this reason, two important changes to appropriately address the gaps that many grantmaking foundations aim to tackle are: (a) designing application processes that explicitly center the needs of underserved and marginalized groups and (b) involving grantees in decision-making.

Combating decades of exclusionary practices requires critical examination of histories and power dynamics between community and university partners. Practical strategies for balancing power and honoring community perspectives are needed (Weil et al., 2013). More specifically, breaking the norm of traditional methods and their exclusionary practices and instead employing innovative methods that center inclusivity is a step toward meaningful engagement that challenges prevailing narratives and uplifts marginalized voices (Bergstrom et al., 2014).

There is a spectrum of ways to shift the balance of power in decision-making and fiscal management within collaborative community-university initiatives to achieve more equitable partnerships (McGinnis Johnson, 2016; Parks, 2021). To redress a grantmaking process that disadvantages intentionally marginalized populations, some funders employ nondiscrimination application review techniques to compare applicants equally. These techniques may include incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion protocols in their processes and organizing anti-oppression staff trainings, yet disparities persist within the granting sphere (Dorsey et al., 2020). More effective approaches to promoting social equity suggest that granting decisions should target and concentrate funding to grantees that serve those with the greatest need, rather than considering all applications equally (Collins & Gerber, 2008).

Increasingly, agencies and organizations are putting decision-making power in the hands of community partners through varying processes, including participatory grantmaking (PGM; Gibson, 2017; Harden et al., 2021; Hauger, 2023; PEAK Grantmaking, 2020). The aim of this paper is to document our team's experience designing,

piloting, and evaluating a PGM process with a cohort of community garden partners, with the intention of shifting decision-making power toward the people most impacted by the issues to be addressed.

Participatory Grantmaking

PGM is “a style of allocating resources that emphasizes decentralized decision-making by those receiving funds” (Harden et al., 2021, p. 1). As with community engagement, PGM is considered a comprehensive approach to grant funding and community-led decision-making that is guided by participatory practices and principles, rather than a set of activities or methods confined to a particular process (Bergstrom et al., 2014). Contrary to traditional grantmaking, there is not a prescribed structure for developing and implementing PGM models. Rather, the process is driven by principles that seek to design an application structure, method of decision-making, and avenues for funding use that most benefit those invited to apply. Gibson (2017) defines a grantmaking process that features community participation as one that:

- empowers “communities by putting money and decision-making power directly in their hands”;
- allows “for more flexibility and, in turn, more innovation and creativity”;
- prioritizes the “experiences and knowledge of those most affected by a problem by involving them in determining the best opportunities for funding solutions,” thereby building the “leadership capacity of community participants”;
- diversifies who “makes decisions about resource allocation” and “encourages collaboration and the forging of relationships among the diverse individuals invited to participate”; and
- promotes “deeper transparency by revealing the inherent power dynamics that come with making decisions about money” (p. 22).

Funding agencies guided by PGM principles use multiple collaborative decision-making grant models. A popular model is called *shared gifting*, which yields decision-making power entirely to the applicants (Harden et al., 2021). At the beginning of the shared gifting process, grantees are told they have equal amounts of funding. After a process of pitching ideas to the cohort, each grantee individually determines whether to “gift” portions of their funding, thereby deciding

the level of funding provided to each grantee. This process employs decentralized financial decision-making by grantees and promotes peer connections (Buhles, 2017; Harden et al., 2021). *Democratic voting* is another model whereby the decision-making power is shared among grantees, funders, and other invited parties (Harden et al., 2021). Each person ranks the submitted proposals from best to worst, guided by criteria established by the process facilitators. The amount of decision-making power allotted to community can range by varying the weight of the vote assigned to each voting group. This collaborative process promotes relationship building between community groups and other voting members as they share experiences and garner ideas from one another (Harden et al., 2021).

Setting

The Food, Fitness and Opportunity Research Collaborative

The Food, Fitness and Opportunity Research Collaborative (FFORC), based at The Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (HPDP) at UNC-Chapel Hill, conducts research and implements health-based programming in marginalized communities, primarily in rural North Carolina. FFORC seeks to build lasting partnerships with community-based leaders through the co-development of programming focused on examining and influencing improvements to nutrition and physical activity options. FFORC's consistent funding source is SNAP-Ed, which prioritizes programming related to food access, nutrition, and physical activity for people eligible for SNAP (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], n.d.-b).

Our research activities have evolved over the years as our research team has developed deeper community partnerships and sought to interrogate the cultural norms embedded in programming related to food access, healthy diets, and active living. Many of these norms are derived from a White and privileged worldview and do not work for all cultures (Hassel et al., 2019). We are developing a practice of listening to the communities where we work and building programmatic structures that are as flexible as possible within the context of the overarching goal (Charles et al., 2023). Many of our partnerships are 10+ years old. That partnership longevity has fostered the development of a deeper sense of trust, which in turn has opened the door to a greater degree of creativity within project cocreation.

Although SNAP-Ed is a ubiquitous source of nutrition and physical activity funding, the current structure of funding allocation didn't start until the passage of the Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010. The act increased focus on multilevel interventions, including policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change efforts and social marketing, to complement core activities in direct education (Burke et al., 2022; Yetter & Tripp, 2020). This shift has expanded the number of allowable activities within SNAP-Ed, which continues to grow as practitioners implement new interventions (USDA, n.d.-a). Our team is at the forefront of testing interventions and partnership structures to support the shift to multilevel interventions.

Community Gardens Program

Since 2014, FFORC has helped launch and support 33 gardens across nine counties. In addition to funding for materials and supplies, marketing, and a stipend for garden management, we have coordinated trainings on garden-related themes (e.g., composting, beekeeping, and DIY design) and program sustainability (e.g., volunteer retention and diversifying funding). Our evaluation focus has evolved from simple annual pre/post surveys that measure healthy food access, fruit and vegetable consumption, and interest/ability to participate in the garden (Chauvenet et al., 2021; Gilbert et al., 2020) to facilitated group discussions to uncover unintended impacts that have occurred because of the projects (Sadeghzadeh et al., 2022).

Through these evaluation efforts, we learned that many of our community garden partners have similar needs and challenges. The colearning that has taken place during group convenings for training has been as rich as the curated content. Further, garden managers have asked to have more regular contact. We have, however, struggled to find meaningful ways to gather due to travel distance and funding limitations.

As our team learned about PGM and began to develop plans to pilot the process, our community gardens program seemed the most optimal collection of potential applicants to engage. In previous years, we shaped program activities and allowed expenses in response to partner feedback; however, that content and the funding allocated to partners was determined by our team. We ultimately came to see this structure as paternalistic and decided to explore a strategy that shifted more power in decision-making to our community partners.

The current makeup of the program is 13 gardens across nine counties in rural Eastern North Carolina, a manageable cohort for our pilot of this process. We have been in partnership with all 13 for at least 3 years, some since the program's inception in 2014. The makeup of garden participants varies across each garden project; however, the majority of participants are African American, and all are SNAP-eligible. We knew from conversations with garden managers that many had ideas to grow their projects in divergent ways that did not fit exactly within our standardized protocol, and this granting process could offer greater flexibility to grantees to pursue such programming. Additionally, with each partner bound together by the common experience of managing a community garden, the foundational setting of each proposal would be similar and familiar to the cohort of applicants to allow for informed ranking of proposal strength. Finally, and importantly, core tenets of a participatory funding mechanism include transparency, feedback, and colearning, all of which allow the groups in direct contact with one another to build relationships with their peers (Bérubé, 2023; Hauger, 2023).

The PGM Process

Developing Our PGM Process

With PGM being a relatively new and innovative concept, we reviewed existing literature to inform our process. Our research uncovered a limited range of PGM structures to model (Chesapeake Foodshed Network, 2018; Community Food Strategies, 2021; Harden et al., 2021; Michigan Good Food Fund, 2020; PB Scotland, 2015; University of Minnesota [UMN] Extension, 2020). Based on this literature review, partner profiles and programmatic findings from previously conducted evaluation methods, and team discussions about priorities related to the skills and characteristics of our partners, we determined that our process would be framed by the following principles:

- Community partners have most of the decision-making power around the prioritization of projects funded and the funding amounts.
- The application process design includes a video or visual elements in proposals, allowing for creativity and flexibility in defining programs that fit community needs.
- The process supports collaboration across partners, promoting relationship building to form a community and learn from one another's experiences.
- The process fosters clear and transparent communication with community partners.
- Community partners have the flexibility to spend their funding where they see fit without the preapproval of funders, so long as the activities fit within SNAP-Ed guidance.

We determined that the UMN Extension's network voting model aligned best with our team's skills and capacities (Harden et al., 2021; UMN Extension, 2020). With our garden partners being spread across nine counties within North Carolina, many were not familiar with others' programs and the communities they serve. To provide greater insight into each applicant's context, we decided to require proposals to have visual elements. Our goal was to allow partners to virtually "visit" each garden to enhance their understanding of each proposal's fit with the garden's services and role in the community.

Along the way, we presented our ideas to our existing community advisory board (CAB) for feedback. This included initially sharing with them the current process for allocating funds to community partners and asking about their experiences with grantmaking processes. Ultimately, we presented the model we selected to our CAB members and had them help us develop clear instructions for introducing it to our community partners.

Implementation of the Network Voting PGM Model

Network voting is a PGM model similar to democratic voting (Evans, 2015; Harden et al., 2021). In this model, applicants submit proposals, and a network of individuals votes on or ranks the proposals. Predetermined award amounts are assigned to each ranking, so voting results determine the amount of funding each applicant will receive.

All 13 of our garden partners were invited to participate in the process. Of the 13, eight decided to participate and submit proposals. By not opting into the process, the other five partners continued to receive similar funding amounts under our original funding structure. Additionally, members of our CAB, along with FFORC team members, were invited to review the proposals and provide their rankings and feedback. Our CAB consists of local community leaders with experience in community-based programming relevant to FFORC's scope of work. Some CAB members are also garden partners. In all, the eight garden partners (applicants), two CAB members,

and seven FFORC team members composed the network of voters.

Our network voting process spanned 10 weeks from October to December 2023, following these steps:

1. Garden Visits. The FFORC team's PGM facilitators visited all 13 garden programs to discuss the opportunity and process with the garden managers. Partners were provided with a Call for Proposals document that outlined the proposal requirements and timeline. If partners opted into the process, a baseline assessment was conducted to gather descriptions of material and human resources that supported the garden, other services they provided as a community group/organization, the garden's role in the community, and plans for program sustainability. This data provided a reference to gauge the process's impact after participation.
2. Proposal Requirements. As outlined in the Call for Proposals, the proposal format was a recorded verbal pitch of 3 to 5 minutes that answered the following questions:
 - a. How does the proposal align with the garden/organization's overall mission and goals? What do you/your organization ultimately hope to achieve as a result of implementing your proposed project?
 - b. What resources will be obtained with the funding to execute the proposal? What existing resources (i.e., personnel, material resources, local partnerships, etc.) will be used to execute the proposal?
 - c. How will you meaningfully engage with your community? How will your project advance community wellness and resilience by addressing equity and/or health issues?
 - d. How does this proposal align with SNAP-Ed objectives, meaning that it relates to improvements to food, nutrition, and/or physical activity within your community?
3. Live Orientation Session. Applicants, CAB and FFORC team members gathered via Zoom to review the steps, application requirements, and timeline through a facilitated group discussion. This session also provided an opportunity to introduce garden partners to one another and establish connections.
4. Proposal Submissions. Partners were given 2 weeks following the orientation to video-record and submit their proposals via Google Drive. We received eight recorded

proposal submissions.

5. Proposal Review. All network members were given 2 weeks to review all submitted proposals using a provided rubric as a guide.
6. Q&A Session. Each participant was assigned one partner to whom they submitted a question for the Q&A session. Subsequently, each applicant was asked two questions during the session, one submitted by another garden partner and one from a member of the CAB or FFORC team. Partners were given the questions in advance to prepare. Each partner had 2 minutes to answer each question during the live session.
7. Network Voting Survey Submission. Based on their evaluations of the recorded proposals and the Q&A session responses, network voters were required to list strengths and opportunities for improvement for at least two proposals, one of which was the partner to whom they were assigned to submit a question in the Q&A session. These evaluations were submitted via an online survey. Voters were also tasked with ranking the proposals based on their evaluation of each proposal's strength and potential impact.
8. Final Rankings and Feedback Notification. To arrive at final scores, votes were weighted based on the network member group (garden partners' votes were weighted higher than CAB member votes, which were weighted higher than FFORC team member votes) and then totaled. Feedback on each applicant's proposal was also compiled. Final scores were sent to the entire network. Proposal feedback was sent to each applicant individually, via email.

Modifications to the Design of the Process

As PGM models are guided by participatory practices and principles rather than a set of steps and activities, each model is designed specifically for potential applicants and others intended to engage in the process (Bergstrom et al., 2014). For this reason, we modified the network voting model to account for the characteristics of the members of our voting network. Modifications included the following:

- Live and recorded elements of the application process were needed to ensure there were opportunities for synchronous community building while considering the network members' varying schedules. For this reason,

the orientation and Q&A sessions were held live, and the proposals were recorded and viewed offline.

- Although we wanted the applicants and others in the voting network to rely on their expertise to review and judge each proposal, we recognized that there was a need for structure and guidance for those ranking proposals and writing and answering Q&A questions. For this reason, we developed a Proposal Review Rubric and a Q&A Question Writing Guide.
- Live sessions were an opportunity for applicants and other voting members to ask clarifying questions about the process. Process facilitators also provided their contact information to voting members so they could connect offline to provide any technical assistance or additional guidance as desired.
- To ensure language was not a barrier to participation, all materials were translated into Spanish. A member of the FFORC team who is a certified interpreter attended all sessions to provide Spanish interpretation and was available offline for applicants to ask questions.
- To include additional community perspectives and lived experiences, members of our team's CAB were invited to review the proposals and provide their rankings and feedback.
- The process was designed to give those closest to community work the greatest decision-making power. Garden partners' votes were weighted the heaviest, CAB members were weighted in the middle, and FFORC team members' votes were given the least weight.

Network Voting Participant Feedback

Following the notification of final rankings and proposal feedback, facilitators talked briefly (15–30 minutes) with each member of the voting network about their experience throughout the pilot process with the aim of improving the quality of the process in future rounds. IRB approval was not sought because this quality improvement process is not considered research and thus is exempt from IRB review.

The questions focused on the following: (a) overall experience with the process, (b) communications and clarity about the expectation of each step of the process, (c) suggestions for improvement in the next PGM cycle, and (d) desire

to participate in future iterations. Community garden partners were also asked about receipt of any benefits beyond the financial award and about any changes made to the planning and evaluation of their program as result of the process. From these interviews, the most salient responses were identified and summarized, and four main themes were identified:

- Clarity of Directions. Participants shared that they easily understood the process. The directions and expectations of each step of the process were clearly presented in the written guides and materials (e.g., Call for Proposals, Proposal Rubric, and Q&A Session and Question Writing Guide). All voting members agreed that the live sessions were organized and efficient, providing opportunities to connect and to clarify and provide additional details about the process.
- Communication Style. Participants felt each step was needed and enjoyed the balance of live and recorded elements throughout the process. Additionally, participants noted that they appreciated the opportunity to have questions answered via email and phone.
- Novelty of Process. Everyone felt as if the process was unique and unlike other grantmaking processes they had participated in before. Participants enjoyed the proposal review step of the process most, as it was an opportunity to learn about the work of other partners and see their gardens to better understand the feasibility of their proposals.
- Future Participation and Engagement. All participants shared that they would participate in a PGM process again. They appreciated that the process encouraged relationship building with others who engage in similar work, and they found value in seeing and learning from other garden programs and the services they provide to their communities.

Different categories of participants also offered feedback specific to their experiences.

Community Garden Partners (Applicants)

- Application Requirements. Applicants stated that the amount of work required to apply was just right. In fact, for those who had experience participating in traditional granting processes, the requirements felt light.
- Opportunity to Network. Applicants enjoyed learning about the work others were

doing in their community throughout the process. They desired more opportunities for connecting with one another during live sessions and would like to have periodic updates on other partners' work throughout the year. Additionally, applicants would have preferred celebrating the voting results with one another live, rather than being notified via email.

- Technical Skills Misalignment. Applicants struggled with the technological aspects of the process, which included recording their submitted proposal, using the Zoom platform for live sessions, and navigating Google Drive to upload their proposal files and access written instructions and recordings of live sessions. Applicants often relied on others in their families, organizations, or communities to navigate this aspect of the process. Although the process was meant to be less time- and resource-consuming than a traditional grant application, with the added opportunity to be creative in proposal design, the process required greater technological expertise than what several applicants possessed.

Community Advisory Board Members

CAB members noted that they had limited understanding of community garden partners' current programming. They had to rely solely on the proposal submissions to provide context to the partners' work and the communities they served. With the proposal submission's time limit of 3 to 5 minutes, CAB members noted it was difficult to discern the feasibility of each proposal when comparing and ultimately ranking them. In contrast to the community garden partners, who were able to lean on their own experiences managing community garden programs, CAB members varied in their knowledge of community gardens and related programming.

FFORC Team Members

Unlike the CAB members, FFORC team members did not lack the context of garden partners' current programming and services. During their interviews, FFORC team members shared that they felt equipped to provide relevant feedback and informed rankings.

Lessons Learned

We developed and piloted a PGM process to shift power and decision-making from

academic institutions to community partners in an effort to achieve more equitable partnerships and support relationship building between our partners. The qualitative findings from our reflection conversations with the network voting participants made it clear that despite the perceived positive outcomes of this PGM process, several opportunities exist for improvement in future iterations.

Lesson 1. Plan for Limited Technical Skill Capacity Among Applicants

The quality of applicants' proposals varied due to the technological skills of garden partners and their support networks. Although one applicant had access to a local videographer to film and edit their video, almost every applicant mentioned in their evaluations that they had limited skill and comfort using technology to create their proposals. Most needed to obtain help from others in their communities. While we asked participants to use video elements to visually enhance the application process, increase access to and visibility of the gardens, and allow for nonwritten proposals, we did not anticipate that in eliminating one challenge (a focus on the written word), we would create another (requiring technological skill). Other researchers have noted that members of marginalized communities experience limited access to technology and/or the skills needed to be able to participate in online initiatives (Sevelius et al., 2020). From this process, we found that applicants required more direct support beyond the live group sessions to confidently produce a proposal that required technological skills.

Lesson 2. Provide Guidance Throughout the Process

Applying for a grant was unfamiliar to some applicants in this process, but a granting scheme with an unconventional application process added a level of unfamiliarity for all. Applicants were encouraged to reach out to facilitators for guidance throughout the process, but generally there was limited use of that offer.

Applicants who utilized the language interpretation services noted the benefits of having an identified member of our team to turn to for support throughout the process. Our FFORC-team-member interpreter was originally tasked with live interpretation of group sessions and translation of all participant materials for Spanish-speaking applicants. However, her role evolved to become more of an advisor who also supported applicants offline. These applicants noted in their

postparticipation interviews that the support of the FFORC team member gave them greater confidence to execute the application process, which was not a feeling other applicants expressed. Given that the applicants requiring language services had a preexisting working relationship with the interpreter, they were comfortable coming to the interpreter to ask for guidance both during and outside of live sessions. This support included coaching on the content of their proposal, translation and addition of English subtitles in their video proposal, and encouragement and motivation throughout the process.

To ensure applicants receive the support and guidance required to participate confidently in this novel granting process, there should be more intentional planning to provide direct, individualized support and be inclusive of the skills, resources, and contexts of each applicant.

Lesson 3. Reviewers Must Have an Understanding of Applicant Context and History

Network voting participants without an understanding of each applicant's work history and context struggled with their proposal assessments. For example, in their postparticipation interviews, the CAB members noted they lacked context to adequately determine the feasibility of each proposal. Although individuals like our CAB members have experience with community-based activities, their programmatic focus is not necessarily the same as that of the applicants. Hence, the struggle they experienced as community program leaders contrasted with the applicants, who mentioned that they used their own experiences with community garden projects to assign rankings and provide feedback on the proposals they reviewed. In addition, FFORC team members felt equipped to rank and provide feedback on the proposals due to their familiarity with the programs. The voting parties' contrasting experiences support the notion that those most familiar with the nature of the proposed programs and the contexts in which they function are best fit to understand proposal requests and make appropriate funding decisions (Joseph et al., 2016). In future iterations of PGM, more effort should be made to align the experience and expertise of the proposal reviewers with the applicants. Further, more context on the work and history of the applicants should be provided to aid in the review of applicant proposals. Moreover, because this process is meant to center community members in decision-making, we will continue to minimize the

decision-making role of FFORC team members to ensure that more decision-making power is provided to those directly engaging in community work.

Lesson 4. Emphasize the Role of Q&A in the Review Process

The Q&A session was meant to function as part of the grant application process by allowing applicants to address reviewer questions prior to ranking. We considered the ability to clarify aspects of the proposals as a beneficial activity for our applicants in honing their ideas before finalizing proposal implementation. However, much of the feedback provided to applicants focused on their video proposals, with limited mention of their responses in the Q&A session. This indicated that voting members may not have considered the Q&A responses in their final rankings and feedback. Given this, we plan to amend our reviewer rubric and other materials to more clearly emphasize the use of applicants' responses in the final rankings and feedback.

Future Directions

With the grant review part of the process completed, we are working to maintain a culture of colearning and sharing within the funded group during their implementation phase. During the gardening season, which also coincides with our grant fiscal year (May through September), our team is conducting site visits to at least two gardens per month to learn of their progress and take photos to share with the broader group, a suggestion made by garden partners during the PGM process evaluation. Those regular check-ins will help the group stay connected to one another's work until we convene in-person for an end-of-year celebration and kickoff for our FY25 plan and process.

In planning for our second PGM iteration, we have identified a handful of modifications to our process. We will continue to refine the language used in describing the process and alter and condense the set of questions for each applicant to answer through their proposals. One of the bigger changes we plan to implement is matching FFORC team members with community garden applicants both to help frame their proposals and, more importantly, to provide technical assistance with video or other visual presentations within the proposals. This change is meant to help community partners feel more confident in proposal development as well as to develop

relationships between individual team members and community partners.

With that change, it will also be important to remove FFORC team members' voting responsibilities. This change will allow academic partners to champion "their" partners' proposals without any conflict of interest within final rankings. We are also considering removing voting responsibilities from FFORC's CAB members. We found this year that CAB members tended to vote more favorably for projects based in the county where they also work, understandably. Further, CAB members lack some of the context on each of the projects that community partners and FFORC team members have. Whether CAB members maintain a voting role or not, our team will plan to provide background information on each of the project partners to increase contextual understanding among the full group. In the meantime, we also intend to stay close to other practitioners implementing similar processes to keep abreast of new insights to apply to our process.

Conclusion

For a first attempt at adopting a PGM methodology, the process went incredibly smooth, with all parties understanding their role and the progression as it unfolded. We will continue to elucidate pinch points and address nuances that can be improved, both from our community partners and UNC team. As we move forward to design and refine future iterations of this equity-oriented granting process, we will seek transparency and inclusion of community in the process design and implementation.

Even if inadvertently, traditional academic research can reenact and reinforce power imbalances, meaning that there must be intentional efforts to include community in process design and implementation. Engaging underserved groups can be especially difficult considering the longstanding political, economic, educational, and employment marginalization that limits certain groups' ability to participate meaningfully in research (Sevelius et al., 2020). Shifts in power and decision-making must include both representation and voice; it is not enough to invite underserved groups to participate in this process (Pratt, 2019). With that being said, interrogating and revising practices to increase transparency and equity in grantor/grantee partnerships is an iterative process that requires constant intention. This account captures a moment on our team's continuum. It has been a positive change, though not without flaws,

and provides a model for how other academic partners might move more decision-making power into the hands of their community partners.

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