

Equitable participatory grantmaking in trans communities: A Q&A with Gabriel Foster

Editor's Note: How do you define an "expert" grantmaker? Sector-wide conversations around equity and inclusion are spurring many funders to reexamine their definition, including how their intended beneficiaries' lived experiences factor into their work.

NCRP's Caitlin Duffy invited the co-founder and executive director of the Trans Justice Funding Project, Gabriel Foster, to delve deeper into how this funding initiative is practicing equitable participatory grantmaking.

CD: *In your funding model, how do you put those historically locked out of the room at the head of the decision-making table?*

GF: Trans Justice Funding Project (TJFP) is a community-led funding initiative founded in 2012 to support grassroots trans justice groups run by and for trans people. We make annual grants by bringing together a panel of trans justice activists from around the country to carefully review every application we receive. We're moving money *and* building a network as we continue to learn what trans justice looks like at this moment in time.

We do it through our Fellowship Model, our application process and the kinds of funds we provide.

Fellowship Model

We have the honor of working with some of the most brilliant, dedicated and passionate trans justice leaders and organizers out there through our Fellowship Model.

Every year we thoughtfully assemble a geographically diverse, intergenerational, multi-ability, multi-racial panel of six trans justice and gender nonbinary individuals to review applications, select grantees and award amounts. The panel is an invitation-only position that rotates each year to ensure variety of participation and provides a stipend that has ranged from \$500 to \$2,200 as our budget has grown.

Assembling and coordinating the funding panel is terribly exciting and not easy. It requires trust-building and coordination of a lot of moving pieces across identities, geographies and personalities. Our two staff manage the process – such as ensuring that the hotel we select for our grantmaking meeting is trans-friendly, creating a playlist of panelists' favorite songs and creatively distributing funds for panelists who are undocumented – and we hire two facilitators to guide the panel's in-person conversations.

Our panelists' visions of philanthropy are just as varied as our applicants'

and grantees' visions of trans justice work. By serving on the panel, they commit to a process that requires a lot of time, attention and unpacking of how we validate work and worth.

In 2017, our fellows read and prepared themselves to discuss 176 applications in detail, centering the leadership of trans people organizing around their experiences with racism, economic injustice, transmisogyny, ableism, immigration, incarceration and other intersecting oppressions. Each fellow was trained to use an on-line voting system, participated in ongoing individual and group check-ins, assisted with outreach and fundraising and convened in New York for a facilitated weekend-long meeting to select grantees using an intersectional and anti-oppressive framework.

The Application Process

TJFP believes that a short application – and a wise and experienced activist panel to read it as if they were a friend – is all it takes to make in-



While on the From the Ground to the Sky listening tour, TJFP interviewed grantees Queer Trans Pueblo in Phoenix, Arizona (left) and former TJFP panelist, Trudee Jackson (right). Photo courtesy of TJFP.

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During this webinar in August 2017, we explored how funders can use their communities' collective wisdom for social change. We looked at community-led grantmaking models from Headwaters Foundation for Justice, The Colorado Trust, Brooklyn Community Foundation and Third Wave Fund. [Learn more and listen to the webinar recording for free on www.ncrp.org/events.](http://www.ncrp.org/events)



formed funding decisions. Many of our applicants do not have nonprofit status or fiscal sponsorship and are all small groups with budgets ranging from \$0 to \$250,000. We know that they have more important work to do than spending all their time trying to romance us. We keep our grant process simple and quick with a 10-question online application and, while the application doesn't require a detailed budget or other supplementary materials, applicants are welcome to share flyers, pictures or videos.

Even if we aren't able to fund a group that meets our criteria, if they consent to it, we add them to our [online directory](#) to document this growing movement and honor applicants' work. The database is available publicly on our website and helps trans organizers connect with each other and gain exposure to other potential funders.

No Strings Attached

For us, community-led means trusting and supporting trans leadership. We [do philanthropy differently](#) and give unrestricted funds because we have confidence that our grantees know best how to use that money. We believe groups should have the freedom to choose how to use the funding themselves and

what financial structure works best for them, based on their own goals.

We love to learn from the leaders we support and to share their work far and wide, but we don't have site visits, and we don't require any reporting because we reject the idea that grantees should be accountable to funders. Instead, we think funders need to be accountable to grantees. We leave it up to our grant recipients to decide if they want to share or be in touch. We've found creative ways – such as our [From the Ground to the Sky](#) listening tour – to connect and share their updates in ways that amplify them and do not require energy away from their work.

CD: Why is it important that marginalized communities – those who've historically not had voice, agency and control over resource distribution – be centered in decision-making around grants?

GF: Trans community members and leaders have been working tirelessly, some for decades, to meet the many needs of our people. Even with increased visibility these days, trans people – especially trans women of color who disproportionately experience [fatal violence](#)¹ – are not any safer. Trans people are used as a political wedge, as our bodies are criminalized and our

existence in public spaces is up for debate – and access to health care, gainful employment and education aren't a guarantee for many of us.

However severe our lack of resources and how uncertain these times are regarding our safety, this doesn't mean that trans communities are not resilient or capable of coming up with their own solutions.

The grantmaking fellows that TJFP gets to work with *are* the people on the “front lines.” They are the experts of their own lives and experiences, making them the most qualified to make decisions with and for their communities. Having a table surrounded with those most affected at the center of our decision-making process is the heartbeat of TJFP. It's not just a radical notion, it's right.

CD: What have you learned from your experience at TJFP?

GF: Over the past five years, we've learned that authentic participatory grantmaking is an intentional process that prioritizes marginalized communities, values lived experience and challenges people to think differently about giving, power and control. It isn't an easy road.

We are deeply committed to removing barriers and building access so that community members who are most affected by intersecting oppressions are able to participate in this process with us. It takes quite a bit of patience and commitment to bring thoughtful people into something versus excluding them. It also takes intentional budgeting. For example, our applications are available in English and Spanish on our website, and we budget for the translation of applications in other languages, as well as translators and ASL interpreters for in-person meetings.

We see a commitment to power sharing and accessibility as completely possible and incredibly necessary during this political moment. In our 2014

Annual Report, disability justice organizer and grantmaking panelist Sebastian Margaret shared heavy-hitting words describing the experience of disability and participation:

“Rarely are we approached ... as critical voices or essential comrades in ‘the struggle’; rarer yet are we considered leaders. ... To extend sustained, informed and accountable resources towards the leadership, agendas, desires, skills and momentum of [LGBTQI Trans] disabled and sick communities is to tilt the bedrock of the status quo. To exhibit trust in us ... would be groundbreaking; to ... ensure such trust is backed by respectful funding is revolutionary.”

Sebastian’s words are powerful because he talks about dismantling infrastructures that have historically excluded the leadership and meaningful participation of marginalized communities. TJFP wasn’t designed to give people a seat at the table. Instead, we wanted to build our own table!

CD: What advice do you have for funders seeking to embrace a more participatory approach to their grantmaking?

GF: If this becomes a direction that more funders decide to move in, I truly hope they do it with mindfulness and extreme care.

There are plenty of models to learn from and people out there with lessons and best practices to be shared. When TJFP was still merely an idea, a lot of time went into researching inspiring efforts like [The Fire This Time Fund](#), a former Chicago-based giving circle, and the [Criminal Justice Initiative](#).

What I hope I *don’t* see happen is marginalized community members being asked to participate in something that’s not actually about sharing power, that exploits them and their time, and/or co-ops participatory grantmaking,

turning it into a harmful experience that can be used as a justification for more “traditional” philanthropy practices.

At TJFP, our mission is to trust and believe in trans leadership, and the last thing we want is to create a harmful experience. Some of the reflections we use and recommend for equitable participatory grantmaking are:

- Are we being fully transparent about our decision-making process to avoid an arrangement where our grantmaking team has less power than appears?
- How are we valuing our grantmakers’ time and expertise? Are we making sure they are well prepared, supported and paid so they can fully participate?
- Are we being mindful that we’ve invited people into a process that they haven’t developed, while asking them to trust it?
- In addition to giving grant awards, is our grantmaking practice one that brings activists and organizers together and helps strengthen the network of a movement?

CD: Any last words for your philanthropy colleagues?

GF: Some of the greatest work is being done radically, outside of structures that can no longer hold how powerful we are. We need trans leadership, from rural areas to urban hubs, to feel empowered and hold positions where they make decisions about resources for their communities. We hope you will join us in trusting, believing and supporting trans justice leaders, wherever and wherever you are. ■

Gabriel Foster is a black, queer, trans, “momma’s boy” living and loving in New York and is co-founder and executive director of the Trans Justice Funding Project. Follow [@TransJusticeFP](#) on Twitter.

Notes

1. Maggie Astor, “Violence Against Transgender People Is on the Rise, Advocates Say,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/us/transgender-women-killed.html>.



2016 Trans Justice Funding Project grantmaking panel, facilitators and staff. Photo courtesy of TJFP.