



Capacity Building Needs Survey of Nonprofits Led by People of Color in Kent County

JUNE 2023



Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

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We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Monique Salinas, Ph.D., founder and principal of Ascend to Greatness, LLC, and Leslie Starsonneck, Kevin Peterson, Teri Behrens, Ph.D., Tory Martin, Karen Hoekstra, and Pat Robinson of the Johnson Center for their assistance in making this report possible.

We are also grateful to each nonprofit leader who took the time to contribute their perspectives to these findings for the field. Eligible survey participants were identified primarily in consultation with Dr. Salinas and from a crowd-sourced list of Black-founded nonprofits in Grand Rapids, Michigan curated by Keli Christopher, Ph.D.

Suggested Citation

Olivarez, J. R., Abalo, T. R., & Yore-VanOosterhout, A. (2023, June). *Capacity building needs survey of nonprofits led by people of color in Kent County*. Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University.

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Executive Summary

For nonprofits led by people of color, traditional capacity building has been inaccessible and often does not meet their needs — part of a larger pattern of racial disparities and failure to support communities of color within the nonprofit sector. These disparities have been attributed to a variety of factors, including exclusion from social networks and historically constrained access to resources which can result in limited capacity growth (individually and organizationally). However, when paired with systemic changes and a racial justice analysis, capacity building can support the success of nonprofits led by people of color. This has implications for closing the nonprofit racial leadership gap and rebalancing inequitable allocation of resources.

From April to May 2021, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University conducted a targeted, invitation-based survey to identify the capacity building supports needed by nonprofit organizations led by people of color in Kent County, Michigan. All respondents were from nonprofits identified by the Johnson Center or other organizations as being directed by people of color, with the majority of respondents from organizations founded by people of color. Specifically, almost 70% of respondents identified as Black/African American; respondents primarily represented young nonprofit organizations, with 40% of organizations one to four years old; and 43% had an average annual budget of less than \$50,000.

The survey's aim was to gain information directly from those working in the field to understand their current needs and aspirations related to building both their own capacity and their organization's capacity as a whole. The key findings presented in this report will inform the design and provision of opportunities for capacity builders to meet the identified capacity building needs of these nonprofit leaders and support the success of these individuals and organizations.

Key Findings

Working with Capacity Builders

Selecting who to work with and how they approach their work is important to meaningful capacity building. Respondents were asked to imagine the top two preferred characteristics of a capacity builder. The top characteristics that they sought in someone who could help strengthen their skills or the organization they represent were emotional intelligence and cultural competence.

Funding for Capacity Building

When asked about availability of funds for organizational or professional development opportunities, nearly half of respondents had some organizational funds available, and they also paid out of pocket or received pro bono services. While this suggests that many respondents ultimately find ways to invest in their development — whether to advance adaptive, leadership, management, or technical capacities — these responses also indicate the need for organizational or communal capacity development funds for those interested in services.

Key Areas for Capacity Building

The survey results made clear that capacity building should be done with authenticity, humility, and an ability to develop interpersonal relationships over the long term. The survey results further made clear that dedicated capacity building funding for respondents is lacking. Respondents indicated that the top three capacity building areas where they needed support were funding, marketing, and a tie between board training on roles and responsibilities and developing a strategic plan. However, if capacity building is to be helpful to respondents, it must emphasize the existing strengths and variance in experiences of these leaders and their organizations as well as the systematic barriers they face.

Respondents also raised the importance of approaching capacity building from a strengths-based perspective, rather than a deficit-based perspective. This recognizes the systems that disadvantage organizations, and that while organizations may need assistance, they bring knowledge and expertise in other areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Participants in this survey helped point the way forward, identifying the importance of reckoning with the systems and power dynamics that shape why many of these needs exist in the first place. This includes the opportunity to guide changes in giving practices with donors and other influencers, replace burdensome — even harmful — evaluation practices, and promote practices that support equitable and cooperative resourcing of nonprofits and communities of color.

This project built a preliminary documentation of the universe of nonprofits led by people of color in Kent County alongside its core intent of identifying organizational capacity building supports. There is a glaring lack of formalized documentation of the nonprofits led by people of color within the region. Two key steps are recommended:

- Shared efforts to formally document this universe will be important in order for the field to continue to assess and act to meet capacity needs, as well as other resources.
- Future study with additional disaggregation of data is also recommended. This could include disaggregation by other socially constructed characteristics of respondents, such as the intersections of race and ethnicity with gender, class, disability, LGBTQIA2S+ identities, and other demographics.



Introduction

Capacity building is the process of “strengthening a nonprofit’s ability to achieve its mission” (Bryan, 2017). Those who facilitate capacity building are capacity builders, “the individuals and organizations that work with nonprofit staff, board members, and volunteers to overcome the barriers that nonprofits face in fulfilling their missions” (Nishimura et al., 2020). The TCC Group has identified key capacities that are crucial for the success of nonprofit organizations (Connolly & York, 2003). These include:

- **technical capacity:** the systems that an organization has in place to implement programs and services;
- **management capacity:** how effectively an organization uses its available resources;
- **leadership capacity:** an organization’s vision, innovation, and decision-making ability; and
- **adaptive capacity:** the ability of an organization to assess and respond to their environment.

For nonprofits led by people of color, traditional capacity building has been inaccessible and often does not meet their needs — part of a larger pattern of racial disparities and failure to support communities of color within the nonprofit sector (Turner-Allen, 2021; Nishimura et al., 2020; EchoHawk, 2019). These disparities have been attributed to a variety of factors, including exclusion from social networks and historically constrained access to resources, which can result in limited capacity growth (individually and organizationally). However, when paired with systemic changes and a racial justice analysis, capacity building can support the success of nonprofits led by people of color. This has implications for closing the nonprofit racial leadership gap (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2017, 2020; Bui, 2019) and rebalancing inequitable allocation of resources to communities of color (Kan, 2021; Dorsey et al., 2020; Barge et al., 2020; Native Americans in Philanthropy, 2019).

From April to May 2021, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University conducted a targeted, invitation-based survey to identify the capacity building supports needed by nonprofit organizations led by people of color in Kent County, Michigan. The survey’s aim was to gain information directly from those working in the field to understand their current needs and aspirations related to building both their own capacity and their organization’s capacity as a whole. These findings can inform the design and provision of opportunities for capacity builders to meet the identified needs of these nonprofit leaders and support the success of these individuals and organizations.

Context and Framing

The term “people of color” originates in the phrase “women of color” coined by Black women leaders at the National Women’s Conference of 1977 (Western States Center, 2011). While U.S. racial formation and identity have a complex and oppressive history as a social construct, “people of color” was a term created and adopted to move away from racist usage of terms like “colored people,” “minorities,” and “non-white” dominant at the time and shift toward inclusive language (Race Forward, 2015).

In this report, “nonprofits led by people of color” considers the racial and ethnic identities of the organizational founders and directors, following the broad definition discussed in the sidebar.

Terminology of Nonprofits Led by People of Color

In this report, **nonprofits led by people of color** are nonprofit organizations where the founder and/or executive director or equivalent identified as a person of color. This report analyzed leadership in terms of the founder(s) and director(s) of a nonprofit, but it did not analyze leadership in terms of governance because of data collection limitations. Report findings are presented as all respondents, unless specified. Respondents included both nonprofits founded and directed by person(s) of color, and nonprofits founded by white person(s) and currently directed by person(s) of color. While this report collectively refers to these organizations as “nonprofits led by person(s) of color,” it does not seek to equate the two.

In the survey we administered, respondents were identified and collectively referred to as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (See Appendix 1.) However, in this report, we refer to them as people of color. When the term “people of color” is used, we are referring to Arab/Arab American, Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander, Black/African American, and Latinx/Hispanic people in Kent County, based on survey responses. When quotations are presented, respondents are not identified by their race or identity in order to preserve anonymity to freely express their responses. Quotations may use people of color (POC) or BIPOC when directly quoting respondents.

We want to be intentional in this language. Otherwise, we risk missing the variety of needs of different organizations led by people of color and their roles in our communities, and contribute to harmful practices. For example, the terms “people of color” and “communities of color” are not intended to be interchangeable with Black or African American. These groups are not monolithic. Reflecting on how we understand and discuss race and ethnicity continues to be an important and dynamic practice. The term “people of color” has been critiqued for its obfuscation of issues arising from systems that disproportionately target Black people and its co-optation from its original meaning. While debated, the term “BIPOC” arose from efforts to bring attention to the experiences, strengths, and struggles of particular communities of color. However, some see it as erasing certain groups. We recognize that there continue to be changes in terminology that reflect the complexity of identity and systems of power.

Methodology

Data Collection

A literature review was conducted on the capacity building needs of national and local nonprofits led by people of color that serve racially and ethnically diverse communities. This work informed the design of the survey instrument. Researchers at the Johnson Center — in cooperation with community partners and other stakeholders — then compiled a list of nonprofits led by people of color and contacts within those organizations. Between April 22 and May 20, 2021, the survey was distributed via email to 79 identified nonprofit organizations led by people of color in Kent County, Michigan. A total of 44 surveys were returned.

These 44 surveys were analyzed, resulting in a usable response rate of 56%. Respondents answered anonymously and were not required to answer every question. Graphs may therefore indicate different numbers of respondents, corresponding to the number of participants responding to that specific question. All respondents worked for nonprofits directed by people of color, with the majority of respondents from organizations founded by people of color. Specifically, almost 70% of respondents identified as Black/African American including 3% who identified as multiracial. Less than 10% identified as Arab/Arab American or Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander. Thirteen percent of respondents identified as Latinx/Hispanic. Respondents primarily represented young nonprofit organizations, with 40% of organizations one to four years old. Forty-three percent had an average annual budget of less than \$50,000.

Table 1. Organizational Characteristics of Survey Participants

Organizational Founding and Leadership	%		Count	
BIPOC-Led	100%		36	
BIPOC-Founded/BIPOC-Led	83%		30	
White-Founded/BIPOC-Led	17%		6	
Primary Mission	%		Count	
Advocacy	8%		3	
Arts/Culture/Humanities	8%		3	
Community Development	14%		5	
Education	14%		5	
Environment/Animals	0%		0	
Health	8%		3	
Human/Social Services	33%		12	
Other (Story/Identity preservation; Economic Development; Housing; Community development and education; mental health awareness & mentoring tutoring)	14%		5	
Average Annual Budget (From Last Fiscal Year)	%		Count	
\$0-\$49,999	43%		15	
\$50,000-\$149,999	26%		9	
\$150,000-\$499,999	9%		3	
\$500,000-\$999,999	6%		2	
\$1-\$5 million	17%		6	
More than \$5 million (please specify)	0%		0	
Length of Operation	%		Count	
1-4 years	40%		14	
5-10 years	23%		8	
11-15 years	9%		3	
16-20 years	9%		3	
More than 20 years	20%		7	
Staffing	Full-Time		Part-Time	
	%	Count	%	Count
1 staff member	22%	8	17%	6
2-5 staff	14%	5	33%	12
6-10 staff	6%	2	6%	2
11-20 staff	6%	2	11%	4
More than 20 staff	8%	3	-	-
N/A - none	44%	16	33%	12
Volunteers (Excluding Board Members)	%		Count	
1-5 volunteers	33%		12	
6-10 volunteers	14%		5	
11-20 volunteers	19%		7	
More than 20 volunteers	19%		7	
N/A - none	14%		5	



The survey group of nonprofits led by people of color was identified using networks. We employed a snowball sampling technique to identify these organizations, relying on existing personal and professional networks. Participants were encouraged to share the survey with other people who they believed met the criteria and would increase the value of the findings. When answering the questions, respondents self-identified and self-reported their demographic information.

Network sources included:

- A consultant from the local nonprofit community, Monique Salinas, Ph.D., founder and principal of Ascend to Greatness, LLC, focused on helping and consulting with nonprofits of color to achieve sustainability;
- Three intermediary organizations in the area: Heart of West Michigan United Way, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, and the Michigan Nonprofit Association; and
- Internal colleagues and community partners connected to the Johnson Center.

Data Analysis

Qualtrics software was used to analyze the survey results. The researchers reviewed aggregated responses and, where possible, looked for differences in responses between nonprofits founded by people of color and nonprofits founded by white people and currently led by person(s) of color. MAXQDA software was used for a qualitative analysis of three open-ended survey questions: based on the respondent's outlook what challenges did their organization face and what strengths did their organization bring, and what were the respondent's top two preferred capacity builder characteristics.

Two groups were convened in November 2021 to interpret the data findings using a participatory data approach. Fourteen individuals from different nonprofits participated, and were offered free access to capacity building programming by the Johnson Center in exchange for their time and feedback.

Limitations

A key limitation of this report is the unmapped universe of nonprofits led by people of color in Kent County. Attempts to address this included contacting intermediary organizations and local networks of people who identify as people of color in the nonprofit field. In the future, it may be useful to partner with more nonprofits led by people of color to further map networks and implement large-scale demographic surveying of these organizations.¹ The survey results cannot be widely applied to all nonprofits led by people of color in Kent County, based on the unknown total universe.

Another key limitation is that no geographic information was collected, other than to confirm that the respondent's organization serves Kent County, in order to preserve anonymity. It cannot be assessed to what extent responses represented urban or rural areas within Kent County and how this accounted for potential differences in needs. Because data collection was dependent on close contact with localized networks, the survey results are likely more representative of the Grand Rapids area than the rest of the county.

¹ After this research was conducted, the Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), in partnership with the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Data Driven Detroit, released the results of a collaborative, first-of-its-kind report highlighting the racial leadership gap in nonprofits across Michigan. The *Michigan Statewide Nonprofit Leadership Census* was published in late 2022 and identifies the percentage of BIPOC nonprofit leaders statewide to provide a clear understanding of the racial and ethnic composition of staff members and boards at nonprofits. See <https://johnsoncenter.org/resource/report-michigan-statewide-nonprofit-leadership-census-2022/>

Findings

Working with Capacity Builders

Respondents were asked to imagine their top two preferred characteristics of a capacity builder. The top characteristics that they sought in someone who could help strengthen their skills or the organization they represent were emotional intelligence and cultural competence. (See Figure 1.)



Respondents reported that emotional intelligence could comprise a wide variety of characteristics, ranging from compassion to humility, from patience to integrity. One respondent sought someone that was more “relational, not approaching me in a transactional way.” Another sought “respect for my expertise” and “a genuine commitment to allow POC to lead.” Another wanted an ally that demonstrated the “ability to deal with conflict in constructive ways.”

The most often-mentioned emotional characteristic was integrity — in particular, according to one respondent, the “integrity to see the project through.”

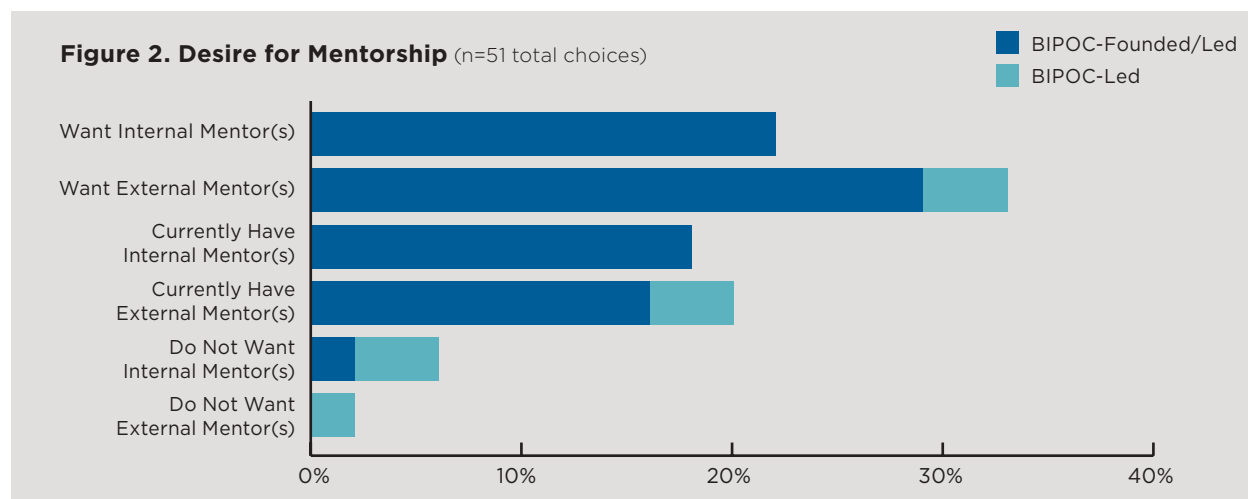
In terms of cultural competence, many respondents were clear: they sought out organizations with other people who “look like me”:

A lived-understanding of how racism and discrimination work and impact POC in our community. What is taught to a white-led nonprofit by a consultant may flop completely with a POC-led nonprofit. All is not always equal. We often must approach things differently to get the outcomes we desire.

Barring that, respondents wanted allies who were not racist, who were anti-racist, or “free from oppressive systems.” One respondent noted the importance of understanding race and class: “not many people understand the different class system.” Beyond these characteristics, respondents looked for “seasoned experience in the real world,” as well as leadership from their allies, such as the “ability to focus on future opportunities.”

Mentorship

Respondents were also questioned about their use of and desire for mentorship, internal and external to their organization. (See Figure 2.) More than one-third of respondents indicated that they currently have mentoring inside or outside their current organization, with outside mentors most frequently reported. More than half of respondents reported they desired mentorship, either internal or external to their organization. Even for those who currently had a mentor, approximately one-third indicated they still wanted a mentor. A small number of respondents indicated not wanting mentoring inside or outside the organization.



Learning Resources Usage and Satisfaction

Respondents were asked to indicate which learning resources they used for professional development, and their satisfaction with those resources when working with capacity builders. Although workshops, webinars, and/or conferences were the most frequently used resources, participants reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with webinars. Conversely, although only about 20% of respondents had experienced one-on-one coaching, most respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with this resource. (See Figures 3 and 4.) The highest rates of satisfaction were reported with in-person training and one-on-on coaching or consulting; followed by support groups, cohorts, or communities of practice; and webinars. Broadly, there was little dissatisfaction for any of the resources.

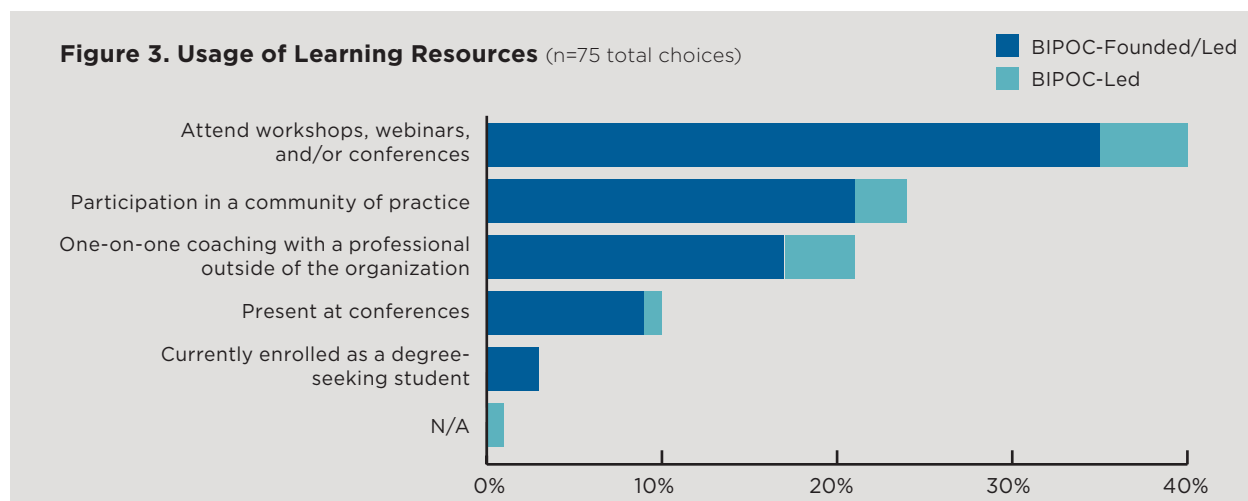
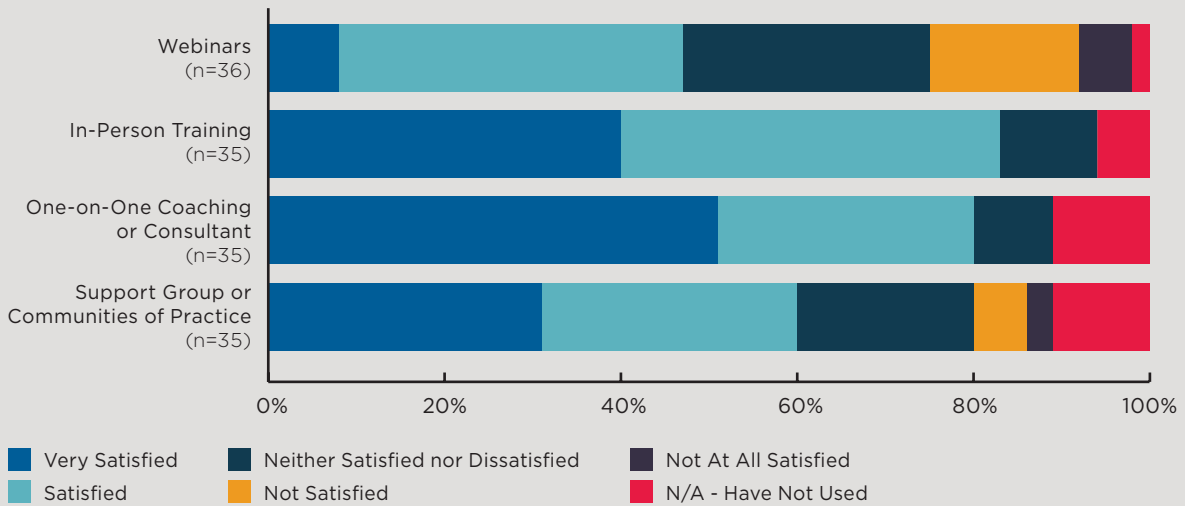


Figure 4. Satisfaction with Learning Resources

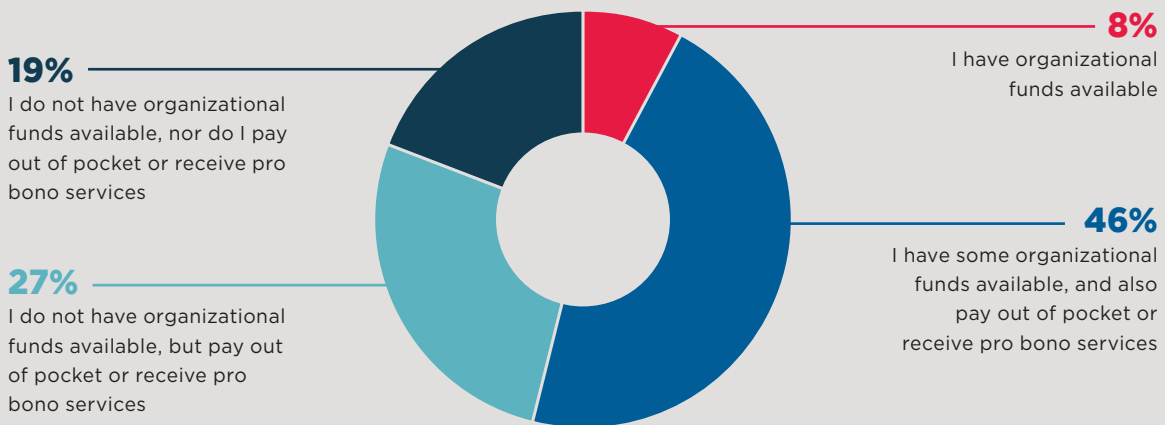


Funding for Capacity Building

When asked about the availability of organizational funds for professional development opportunities, only 8% of all respondents indicated that they have organizational funds available. Nearly half indicated that they have paid out of pocket or received pro bono services in addition to utilizing organizational funds. More than one-quarter have relied solely on paying out of pocket or using pro bono services. The remaining 20% did not have funds available, did not pay out of pocket, and did not use pro bono services. (See Figure 5.)

While this suggests that many respondents ultimately find ways to invest in their professional development — whether to advance adaptive, leadership, management, or technical capacities — these responses also indicate the need for organizational capacity development funds for those interested in services. This need is also indicated by respondents’ budgets: 43% indicated they operate on an annual budget of less than \$50,000. (See Table 1.)

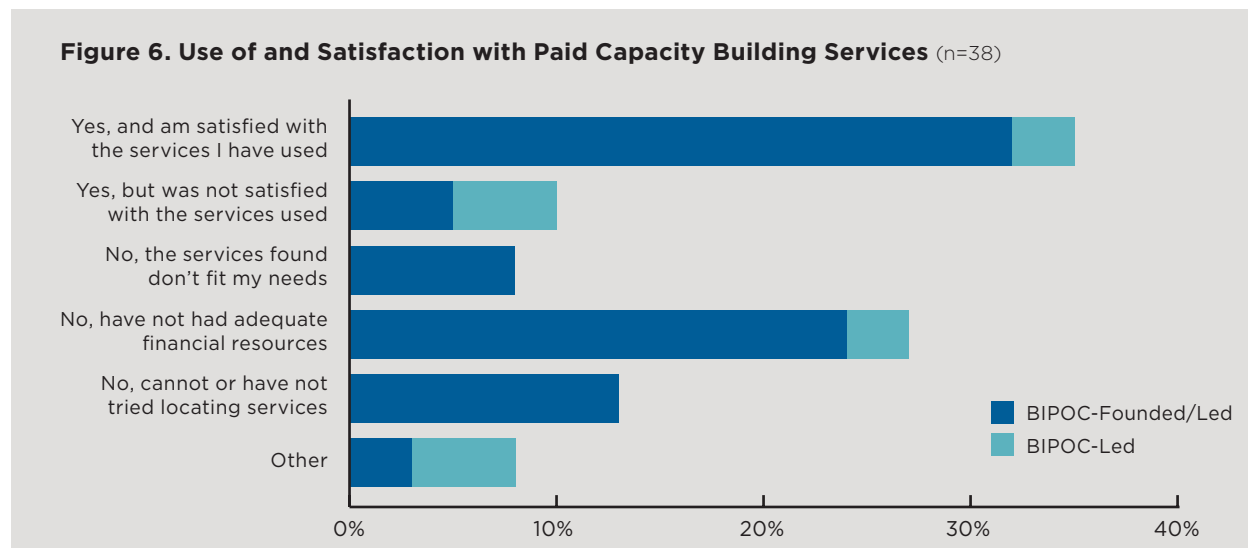
Figure 5. Availability of Organizational Funding for Professional Development (n=37)



For BIPOC-Founded/Led, findings were similar: 6% indicated they have organizational funds available; 42% have some organizational funds available; 29% pay only out of pocket or pro bono; and 23% do not have organizational funds, pay out of pocket, or pro bono (n=31).

Use of Paid Services

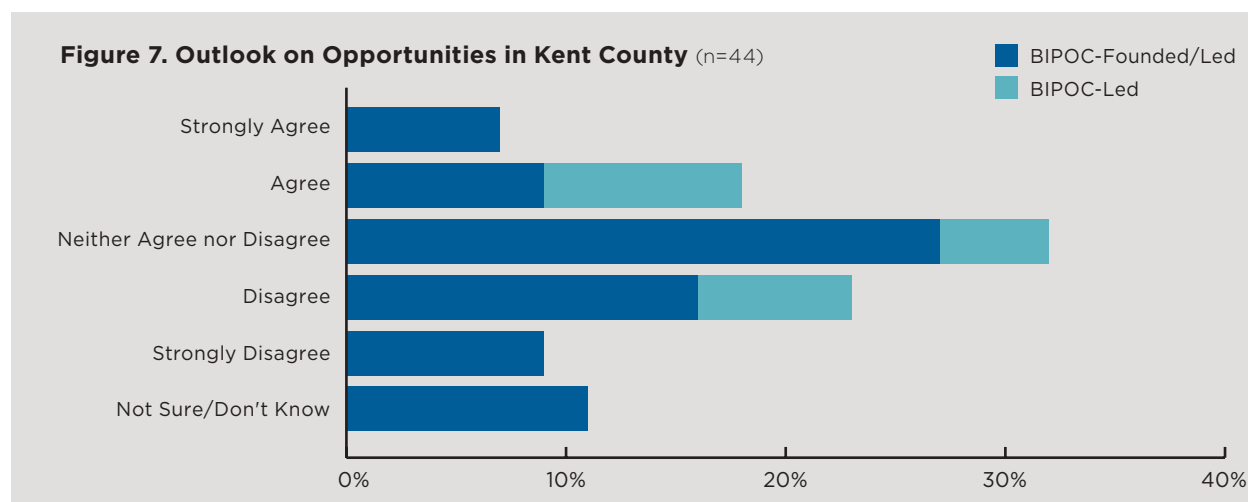
Respondents were asked if they had used paid services for organizational or professional development in the past three years, and if they were satisfied with those services. (See Figure 6.) Roughly one-third of respondents indicated they used paid services, and most were satisfied with the services received. However, nearly half of all respondents indicated they had not found services that fit their needs or had no funds for paid services in the past three years. As one respondent shared, “only in the last 18 months have we had funding for the type of assistance we’ve needed in the last 7+ years.”



Key Areas for Capacity Building

Outlook on Opportunities in Kent County

Respondents were asked to reflect on whether opportunities have progressively improved over the past decade for POC-led nonprofit organizations in Kent County. (See Figure 7.) Only one-fourth of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Since 2011, opportunities have gotten progressively better for nonprofits led by or founded by Black, Indigenous, and/or other people of color (BIPOC) in Kent County.” Respondents most frequently indicated ambivalence to the statement. However, because communities of color have historically been disadvantaged, this may indicate a continuation of inequitable access to opportunities.



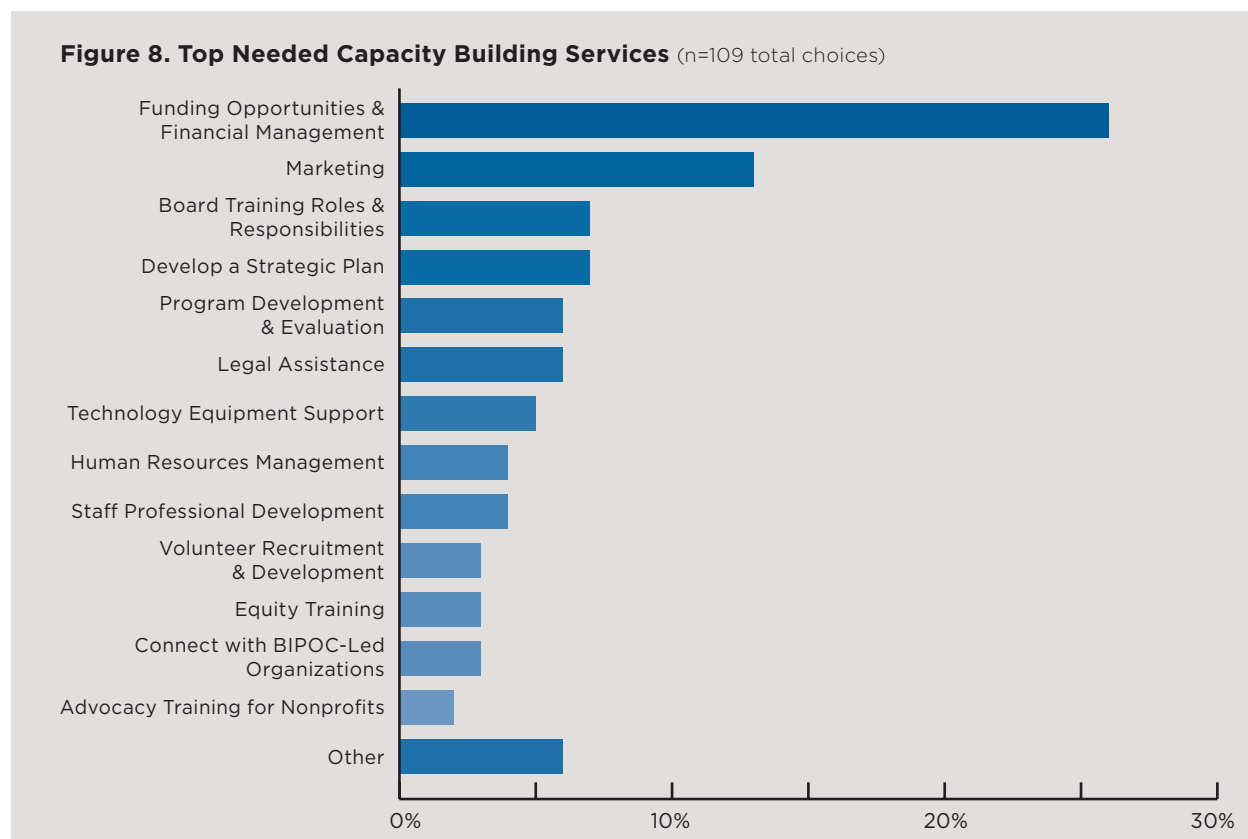
Respondents elaborated on the above question and described the processes and impacts of inequitable re-sourcing. They connected this outlook to an experience of “systems built for BIPOC folks to fail” and problems with lack of trust and respect in dominant white culture — ranging from implicit bias and microaggressions to generational wealth divides. Specific examples cited were widespread distrust of Arab and Muslim communities within the larger West Michigan community; inequitable distribution of wealth between white and African American leaders; and lack of deep business or social relationships as children of immigrants, in comparison to those cultivated over generations by non-immigrant peers.

Top Three Capacity Building Needs

Respondents were then asked to identify the top three areas where they needed support from a list of services commonly offered by capacity builders. The top three services were: funding (26% indicated a need for support with fundraising, financial management, and tools for finding funding opportunities); marketing (13% selected assistance with digital, communications, public relations, and community relations); and a tie between board training on roles and responsibilities and developing a strategic plan (7% each). (See Figure 8.)

Respondents who needed services other than those on the given list were often from nonprofits that had been operating longer than five years. As described by respondents, they needed:

- “flexible capacity building dollars,”
- “better BIPOC representation in philanthropy,”
- “support for sabbaticals for BIPOC leaders,” and
- “a physical space for operations.”



Respondents also raised the importance of approaching capacity building from a strengths-based perspective, rather than a deficit-based perspective. This nuance recognizes the systems that disadvantage organizations, and acknowledges that while organizations may need assistance, they bring knowledge and expertise in other areas. According to one respondent,

What we do need, which was not even a consideration in your [survey], is genuine equity and inclusion in the nonprofit world. You are approaching this survey from a deficit-based approach which is exactly what the broader community continues to do. It is insulting that you do not ask if we need things such as ... a seat at decision-making tables; introductions to major donors; the ability to influence change in giving practices; etc.

If our region is to ever experience true transformation, it will only occur when the value that people of color bring to these types of conversations begin to drive the discussions. We have not reached that point yet. I do appreciate the Johnson Center's efforts to explore discrimination in this sector but we have a long way to go. The only way for genuine transformation to materialize is for those who are INFLUENCERS to begin to yield power to those who are the INFLUENCED. Otherwise, status quo will remain constant...

Funding

To further explore capacity building service needs, respondents were asked how challenging they found common nonprofit funding activities. Overall, they found the majority of the listed activities somewhat or very challenging. (See Table 2.) The top two activities respondents reported as “very challenging” were establishing relationships with individual donors, planned giving, and/or corporate sponsorships and technology or software to manage information about funders.

Finding entry points into funding was generally reported as a challenge. Almost two-thirds of respondents reported that the requirements of board member participation in fundraising were somewhat or very challenging. The vast majority of respondents reported that finding relevant grant opportunities was somewhat or very challenging, while 84% indicated the same for establishing relationships with foundations. Almost three-quarters of respondents indicated that meeting the eligibility requirements for grant or funder opportunities was also somewhat or very challenging.

Table 2. Challenges with Funding (n=37)

	Not Challenging At All	Somewhat Challenging	Very Challenging	N/A - Unaware
Establishing Relationships with Foundations	11%	46%	38%	5%
Establishing Relationships with Individual Donors, Planned Giving, and/or Corporate Sponsorships	5%	24%	65%	5%
Finding Relevant Grant Opportunities	8%	51%	35%	5%
Maintaining Relationships with Financial Supporters	22%	41%	24%	14%
Meeting Eligibility Requirements for grant/Funder Opportunities	22%	49%	24%	5%
Requirements of Board Participation in Fundraising	27%	35%	30%	8%
Technology/Software to Manage Information about funders	8%	38%	49%	5%
Other/Not listed	17%	8%	42%	33%

Strength: Cooperation and Perseverance

Respondents referred to a focus on cooperative culture in the face of systems that focus on competition within the sector. For example, one respondent cited the importance of serving as fiduciaries for non-501(c)(3)-certified groups to be able to do important work. Another strength emphasized was perseverance in the face of under-resourcing. Some respondents cited “amplifying resilience” and “embodying a support system” while another cited the “ability to manage a budget effectively due to having less funding options.”

Challenge: Racist Funding Mechanisms and Sustainable Funding Networks

When asked to reflect on challenges generally, respondents most often cited inadequate funding as a challenge they face. While mirroring a challenge that many, if not most, nonprofits face across the board, their responses offered a more nuanced view of this problem: rather than simply not having the money they need to do their work, respondents said they face funding mechanisms that are biased against them, privileging their white-led peers. “Funders honestly nickel-and-dime BIPOC-led organizations while dumping funds with white-led organizations to do work in BIPOC communities,” said one respondent. Or, as another respondent observed, “white people tend to give money to other white people they know even if a more highly qualified person of color asks.”

Compounding this treatment are racist stereotypes and assumptions that many respondents face. For example, some respondents pointed to reductive thinking that erased their specific experiences and placed them in overly simplistic categories. According to one respondent,

BIPOC leaders often have the additional burden of being one of very few BIPOC [people] at decision-making tables. This often forces us to speak for entire communities of BIPOC [people] — diluting the messaging and efforts that are specific to the organizations we lead.

Even the supposedly inclusive acronym “BIPOC” is problematic, as another respondent said: “being labeled BIPOC makes light of the different identities, ethnicities, and nationalities and cultures covered under this umbrella.” Moreover, the racist tendency to generalize across entire groups of people does harm to the organizations attempting to serve them. As one respondent said,

We are consistently considered as suspect in how we do business and are judged by previous encounters systems have had with other POC organizations. White organizations can fail over and over again and still receive grace but not us. A mistake by one organization can follow all organizations of color for decades.

Respondents also pointed out that they did not have “access to networks of donors” and “still face hurdles accessing larger foundations and grants.” Responses indicate variation by years in operation: younger nonprofits one to four years old most frequently reported that “establishing relationships with foundations” was very challenging (n=14), while nonprofits more than 20 years old reported this most frequently as somewhat challenging (n=7). However, the majority in both groups indicated that “establishing relationships with individual donors, planned giving, and/or corporate sponsorships” was very challenging. (See Table 2.)

Furthermore, the money that is available is often not sustainable. As one respondent explained, POC-led organizations are required to “jump through unnecessary hoops, [e.g.,] looking for all kinds of ‘shiny new’ in developing programs instead of having adequate time to actually fine-tune what they are doing.”

Hand in hand with financial challenges, said other respondents, is a lack of social capital. While many of their white peers can draw on generations of networking and wealth, explained one respondent, historically rooted racism can limit those resources for leaders of color. “From my experience,” this respondent said, “[...] leaders of these organizations are passionate and hands-on, but often lack the breadth and depth of connections and influence to pull strings and position the organization in a good starting position to compete for limited resources.”

Programming and Services

Respondents were then asked about different areas of programming and services. Overall, these data indicate that they feel somewhat to very confident about different areas of programming. Nearly 60% of respondents reported they felt very confident and more than one-third felt somewhat confident in program delivery. (See Table 3.) Similar confidence was reflected in program planning and program design.

Possible areas for capacity development may be in evaluation and data. Almost two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were somewhat confident, and 14% indicated they were not at all confident in program evaluation. Meanwhile, only slightly more than half indicated that they were somewhat confident in implementing a needs assessment, and nearly 20% stated they were not at all confident. These data indicate that respondents may benefit from support in evaluation that meets their needs and desired outcomes.

Table 3. Confidence in Programming and Services

	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not At All Confident	N/A - Unaware
Needs Assessment for Program (n=37)	24%	54%	19%	3%
Program Planning (n=36)	50%	44%	6%	0%
Program Design (n=37)	46%	46%	8%	0%
Program Evaluation (n=37)	19%	65%	14%	3%
Program Delivery (n=37)	57%	35%	5%	3%

Strength: Strong Community Focus

Respondents indicated that nonprofit work led by people of color is also more “grassroots” in the sense that, according to one respondent, it “relies on its close connections and relationships with the people in its own community to carry out its purpose.” As a result, nonprofits led by people of color can be “powerful allies” for their communities, building pride as much as they advocate for broader access to services and “speak truth to power.”

Other strengths include the creativity to generate positive, enduring solutions to a community’s needs — not short-term or even punitive “fixes.” This creativity is often born from the different perspectives these organizations hold in contrast to their white-led peers, according to one respondent, bringing “flavor, brilliance, a fresh outlook [...] and many ideas that aren’t as tainted by white supremacy culture.”

Challenge: Evaluation Practices that Center White Donors

Participants in the analysis of the survey findings noted the importance of framing data. They described a difference between knowing what data to collect and telling a story to funders and others about outcomes. This included inadequate resources to capture the story of their work in ways that lead to funding in the first place, misalignment between what nonprofits deem as important and what funders deem important, and timelines that are too short to measure long-term systemic outcomes. Respondents may specifically benefit from help in

framing their work in ways that resonate with funders, especially when respondents pointed to a system where funders require them to prove themselves or ‘fit’ into guidelines. One respondent explained:

We are in relationship with community enough to evaluate and ask ‘Is this working [for] you? Is this helpful to you?’ [Evaluation currently is focused] more about how we frame our problem solving to get funding... to say, ‘I know how to prove what I’m doing.’ That’s usually the language of program development and evaluation – data collection, measurable outcomes... ‘Are you confident you can collect data and frame narrative in a way [that says] you’re doing good work?’ Well yeah, I’m developing and talking to people if what we’re doing is working, [and] filling that gap. But what we don’t have confidence in is ‘Are people going to believe this is on point? Is this enough to be held accountable to a funder?’ So, a lot of layers here.

Being situated in a predominately white culture also brings other challenges, according to respondents. These range from partner organizations that are ignorant of the challenges facing communities of color, to language barriers, to “skewed evaluation practices.” Regarding the latter, according to one respondent, their organizations are frequently “expected to collect unneeded data (on things that have already been studied 100 times over) instead of being allowed to simply DO THE WORK.” Even worse, this respondent continued, “this creates distrust with the community.” Another respondent described “an exhaustion that comes with the wordsmithing required from BIPOC leaders to not ‘frighten’ audiences who want to be perceived as progressive but — because they haven’t actually done the work — may not be ready to constructively engage in difficult dialog.”

Board Performance

When asked about aspects of board performance, respondents most frequently reported feeling very confident about their board’s capacity to execute their organization’s mission and vision and maintain positive relationships with staff leadership. (See Table 4.) Overall, there were few respondents who reported feeling not at all confident about their board’s activities, but respondents indicated there were key areas where they felt only somewhat confident, such as their board’s capacity to assess organizational performance, improve board performance, and resolve key strategic or policy issues. Almost all respondents indicated they felt only somewhat confident or not at all confident in their board’s capacity to develop financial resources, while 81% indicated the same lack of confidence in their boards’ capacity to cultivate new board leadership.

Table 4. Confidence in Board Performance

	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not At All Confident	N/A - Unaware
Execute Organizational Mission and Vision (n=37)	57%	38%	5%	0%
Resolve Key Strategic or Policy Issues (n=37)	30%	59%	8%	3%
Develop Financial Resources (n=37)	5%	59%	32%	3%
Build Engagement with Community & Other Key Stakeholders (n=37)	24%	51%	24%	0%
Assess Organizational Performance (n=37)	19%	73%	8%	0%
Maintain Positive Relationship with Staff Leadership (n=37)	57%	35%	5%	3%
Improve Board Performance (n=37)	19%	65%	16%	0%
Cultivate New Board Leadership (n=36)	17%	53%	28%	3%

Staffing

Respondents were also questioned about challenges with common nonprofit staffing activities. Relatively few participants reported challenges obtaining a quick turnaround on hiring decisions. (See Table 5.) The top two staffing activities respondents indicated as very challenging were having enough staff to meet operations and program needs and offering competitive compensation. More than 40% of respondents indicated that finding candidates with lived experiences that reflect the communities they serve was somewhat challenging, while more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that offering professional development for staff was somewhat or very challenging. Write-in responses included challenges with securing the necessary funding to hire and pay staff, being entirely volunteer-run, and a lack of support for the legal aspects of human resources.

Table 5. Challenges with Staffing Activities

	Not Challenging at All	Somewhat Challenging	Very Challenging	N/A - Unaware
Have Enough Staff to Meet Operations and Program Needs (n=36)	6%	33%	56%	6%
Offer Competitive Compensation (n=36)	14%	8%	58%	19%
Offer Professional Development for Staff (n=35)	17%	34%	34%	14%
Time to Recruit and Interview (n=36)	17%	33%	36%	14%
Find Qualified Candidates with Lived Experiences that Reflect Communities Served (n=35)	29%	43%	20%	9%
Quick Turnaround on Hiring Decisions (45 days or less) (n=36)	44%	11%	11%	33%

When asked about staff retention, respondents indicated that retention of experienced or management level staff was most frequently very challenging, while retention of senior or executive level staff was most frequently not applicable. (See Table 6.) This coincided with challenges regarding having enough staff to meet operational needs and offering competitive compensation. Many respondents indicated that staff retention generally was not applicable, which may coincide with demographic responses that their organization had either no full-time or part-time staff, one full-time staff member, or two to five part-time staff members.

Table 6. Challenges with Staff Retention

	Not Challenging at All	Somewhat Challenging	Very Challenging	N/A - Unaware
Entry-level Staff (n=36)	22%	36%	14%	28%
Mid-level Staff (n=35)	23%	20%	20%	37%
Experienced or Management Staff (n=35)	14%	23%	29%	34%
Senior or Executive Level Staff (n=35)	23%	17%	20%	40%

Strength: Importance of Lived Experiences

Broadly speaking, a unique strength that respondents cited most often is a profound understanding of racially and ethnically diverse populations and an understanding of their needs and the challenges they face. For many respondents, this understanding comes from their own identification with the communities they serve. As one respondent asked,

How many men are responsible for organizations that are created to help women? Aren't women better at recognizing the needs of women? The same is true for BIPOC organizations. Who would know what we need and how to solve our problems better than us?

Underlying this strength are several other characteristics that respondents highlighted. Because of this “intuitive understanding of issues facing communities of color,” POC-led nonprofits tend to employ compassionate staff, according to some respondents. “BIPOC leaders [...] tend to make connections with the people we serve that are less hierarchical and condescending,” said one respondent. “We see ourselves reflected in both their strengths and vulnerabilities.”

Challenge: Tokenization and White Culture

Other respondents pointed to the contradictory position they occupy in a predominately white culture. On one hand, leaders of color are required to “constantly prove that we are capable and intelligent and that we weren't ‘diversity’ hired.” But on the other hand, as this respondent continued,

We are asked to do work that primarily white institutions would NEVER be expected to do [...] One of the most obvious things we are asked to do is CONSTANT and CONTINUOUS work in DEI for other institutions, as though the whiteness of West Michigan is our first priority and running our own organizations is a secondary thing.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

The survey results made clear that capacity building should be done with authenticity, humility, and an ability to develop interpersonal relationships over the long-term. The survey results further made clear that dedicated capacity building funding for respondents is lacking. Respondents indicated that the top three capacity building areas where they needed support were funding, marketing, and a tie between board training on roles and responsibilities and developing a strategic plan. However, if capacity building is to be helpful to respondents, it must emphasize the existing strengths and variance in experiences of these leaders and their organizations as well as the systematic barriers they face.

Throughout the survey results, respondents reflected on their strengths and experiences as they intertwine with racism, and specifically how this shows up in the nonprofit sector in Kent County. They discussed the impact these inequities and traumas continue to have on their organizations and communities, and how widespread they are. These impacts take the form of often implacable barriers such as divides in access to funding and social networks; beliefs and practices that tokenize and erase specific experiences; generalizations and assumptions about the perspectives, needs, or aims of communities of color; and inequitable, often punitive policies and approaches.

Participants in this survey helped point the way forward. They identified that power-conscious and strengths-based approaches to capacity building recognize the needs their organizations face and reckon with the

systems and power dynamics that shape why many of these needs exist in the first place. This includes the opportunity to guide changes in giving practices with donors and other influencers, replace burdensome – even harmful – evaluation practices, and lift up practices that promote equitable and cooperative resourcing of nonprofits and communities of color.

Recommendations for Further Research

This project built a preliminary documentation of the universe of nonprofits led by people of color in Kent County alongside its core intent of identifying organizational capacity building supports. There is a glaring lack of formalized documentation of the nonprofits led by people of color within the region. Two key steps are recommended:

- Shared efforts to formally document this universe for the field to continue to assess and act to meet capacity needs, as well as other resources.
- Future study with additional disaggregation of data. This could include disaggregation by other socially constructed characteristics of respondents, such as the intersections of race and ethnicity with gender, class, disability, LGBTQIA2S+ identities, and other demographics. (See Appendix 2.)

Future evaluations might also consider the following research questions:

How might the strengths and capacity needs of a nonprofit founded and directed by people of color differ from a nonprofit founded and directed by white people?

Little research has been done on the importance of the race and ethnicity of a nonprofit's founder(s). Research questions could explore how a founder's lived experiences may impact how they approach their work, including fulfilling their organization's mission, building community relationships, and engaging against racism and other overlapping oppressions. This focus of study may illuminate potential differences between the strengths and capacity building needs of nonprofits founded and directed by people of color and those founded and directed by white people.

How might the strengths and capacity needs of a nonprofit leader of color in a POC-founded nonprofit differ from those of a nonprofit leader of color in a white-founded nonprofit?

This report analyzed nonprofits founded by people of color as a segment of all respondent results to explore potential differences in experience. However, the majority of respondents were from nonprofits founded/directed by people of color, and too few POC-directed but white-founded organizations participated in the survey to see meaningful distinctions.

How might the racial or ethnic identities of a nonprofit's governance board impact nonprofit capacity needs?

This report considered the racial and ethnic identities of nonprofit founder(s) and director(s), but not those of individuals in board positions. Studying leadership in terms of governance may be especially important because the vast majority of nonprofit board members are white. For example, for a nonprofit who is directed by a POC leader, but historically governed by majority white people, how might this affect access to funding and resources, organizational history and culture, and other power dynamics?

How might capacity building throughout the nonprofit talent pipeline expand the field's perspective on capacity building needs?

This survey sought to identify *organizations* to assess capacity building needs, but it may be useful to also identify POC *individuals* who are currently in nonprofit leadership positions, seek to become organizational leaders, or have left the nonprofit sector to take on leadership roles in the public or private sectors. This may expand the field's perspective on capacity building needs, because POC leaders may be involved with multiple organizations, and it may account for turnover or transition to different organizations and sectors.



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Appendix 1: Survey Protocol

Q1. Do you work for an organization that is a 501(c)(3)-tax deductible organization?

- Yes
- No

Q2. Is your organization located in or serves communities in Kent County?

- Yes
- No

Q3. Is your organization currently led by leader(s) who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC)?

- Yes
- No

Q4. Is your organization founded by leader(s) who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC)?

- Yes
- No

Q5. Does your organization primarily serve a particular racial/ethnic group?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question

If Does your organization primarily serve a particular racial/ethnic group? **Yes is Selected**

Q6. What primary racial/ethnic group does it serve? _____

Q7. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“Since 2011, opportunities have gotten progressively better for nonprofits led by or founded by Black, indigenous, and/or other people of color (BIPOC) in Kent County.”

- Strong Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- I'm not sure / don't know

Q8. Based on your outlook, what systemic challenges do BIPOC-led organizations face?

Q9. Based on your outlook, what strengths do BIPOC-led organizations bring?

Q10. We would like to understand what your organization may need in order to be stronger. Please indicate which of the following list of services provided by consultants you feel you would most benefit from. Please select the top three.

- Advocacy training for nonprofits
- Board training for current board members on roles & responsibilities
- Connecting with BIPOC-led organizations
- Developing a strategic plan for the future
- Diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, and/or anti-racism training
- Fundraising, financial management, and tools for finding funding opportunities
- Human resources management
- Legal assistance (including on matters such as tax status or incorporation rules, bylaws, workplace rules including hiring, etc)
- Marketing (including communications, PR, digital marketing, & community relations)

- o Professional development for staff
- o Program development & evaluation
- o Technology equipment & support
- o Volunteer recruitment & development
- o Other, please describe: _____
- o Other, please describe: _____

Q11. We would like to understand what’s important to you when working with an outside consultant getting assistance in the services listed previously.

Q11.A. Please finish this sentence: “The top two characteristics someone who can help strengthen my skills or my organization needs to have for me to consider working with them are...”

Q11.B. Have you used paid services for organizational or professional development in the past three years? Please check all that apply.

- o Yes, and I am satisfied with the services I have used
- o Yes, but I was not satisfied with the services I have used
- o No, I cannot or have not tried locating these services
- o No, the services I have found don’t fit my needs
- o No, I don’t have financial resources for paid services during this time
- o Other, please describe: _____

Q11.C. Which best describes your funding availability for organizational or professional development opportunities?

- o I have organizational funds available
- o I have some organizational funds available, and I also pay out of pocket or receive pro bono services
- o I do not have organizational funds available, but I pay out of pocket or receive pro bono services
- o I do not have organizational funds available, nor do I pay out of pocket or receive pro bono services

Q12. How challenging do you find the following funding activities?

	Not Challenging	Somewhat Challenging	Significantly Challenging
Establishing relationships with foundations			
Establishing relationships with individual donors, planned giving, and/or corporate sponsorships			
Finding relevant grant opportunities			
Maintaining relationships with financial supporters (consistency of funding available)			
Meeting eligibility requirements for grant/funder opportunities			
Requirements of board participation in fundraising			
Technology/software to manage information about funders			
Other/Not Listed			

Q13. How challenging do you find the following paid staffing activities?

	Not Challenging	Somewhat Challenging	Significantly Challenging
Having enough staff to meet operations and program needs			
Offering competitive salary			
Offering professional development for staff			



Finding time to recruit and interview in conjunction with other duties			
Finding qualified candidates with lived experiences that reflect the communities we serve			
Having quick turnaround on hiring decisions (45 days or less)			
Retaining entry-level staff			
Retaining mid-level staff			
Retaining experienced/management staff			
Retaining senior/executive level staff			
Other_____			

Q14. How confident do you feel about your board's capacity to successfully engage in the following activities...

	Significantly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not at All Confident
Execute your organization's mission or vision			
Resolve key strategic or policy issues			
Develop financial resources			
Build engagement with key stakeholders/community			
Assess organization's performance			
Maintain positive relationship with staff leadership			
Improve board performance			
Cultivate new board leadership			

Q15. How confident are you with the following areas of program development and evaluation?

	Significantly Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not at all Confident
Needs assessment for program			
Program planning			
Program design			
Program delivery			
Program evaluation			



Q16. In what ways do you receive ongoing professional development?

- Attend workshops, webinars, and/or conferences
- Currently enrolled as a degree seeking student
- Participation in a community of practice
- Present at conferences
- One-on-one coaching with a professional outside of the organization
- Other; please explain: _____
- N/A

Q17. Generally, how satisfied are you with these types of resources?

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Not Satisfied	Not at all satisfied	N/A
1:1 Coaching/Consultant						
Communities of Practice / Cohort / Support Group						
In-Person Training						
Webinars						

Q18. We would like to learn more about your mentorship needs and relationships. Please select all that apply:

- I currently have mentor(s) *within* my job/organization
- I want mentor(s) *within* my job/organization
- I do not want to have mentor(s) *within* my job/organization
- I want mentor(s) *outside* my job/organization
- I currently have mentor(s) *outside* my job/organization
- I do not want to have mentor(s) *outside* my job/organization

Q19. What is your current role with your nonprofit?

- Board member
- Executive Director or Chief Executive Officer
- Operations or Non-Programming Staff
- Program Assistant or Associate
- Program Director or Manager
- Other (please elaborate) _____

Q20. How do you identify your race / ethnicity? (Please mark all that apply)

- Arab/Arab American
- Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Latinx/Hispanic
- Multiracial
- Native American/Indigenous
- My race/ethnicity is not represented on this list (please elaborate) _____

Q21. How do you identify your gender?

- Cis-man
- (Cis or trans) Gender non-binary, gender non-conforming, or genderqueer person
- Cis-woman
- Trans-man
- Trans-woman
- My gender is not represented on this list (please elaborate) _____

Q22. Do you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, or another identity that is part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community?

- Yes
- No



Q23. Which age category do you fall within?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years old+

Q24. Do you identify as having a disability?

- Yes
- No

Q25. Do you consider yourself part-time or full-time?

- Part-time (less than 25 hours)
- Full-time (greater than 25 hours)

Q26. We would like to learn about equitable compensation in Kent County for BIPOC-led nonprofits. Please select which range your annual income from your primary nonprofit position falls within:

- I do not receive a salary
- Below \$9,999
- \$10,000 to \$24,999
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- Greater than \$75,000

Q27. What language(s) do you feel most comfortable speaking? _____

Q28. What level of formal education have you attained?

- Less than High School
- High School Diploma (or similar)
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree (and/or some graduate courses)
- Master's Degree
- Post-Graduate Degree
- Other, please describe _____

Q29. How many years have you been working in the nonprofit sector?

1. 1 year or less
2. 2-5 years
3. 6-10 years
4. 11 years or above

Q30. What one of the following broad categories best describes your nonprofit's primary mission?

- Advocacy
- Arts/Culture/Humanities
- Community Development
- Education
- Environment/Animals
- Health
- Human/Social Services
- Other (please elaborate) _____

Q31. How many full-time staff work for your organization?

- 1 staff member
- 2-5 staff
- 6-10 staff
- 11-20 staff
- More than 20 staff



Q32. How many part-time staff work for your organization?

- 1 staff member
- 2-5 staff
- 6-10 staff
- 11-20 staff
- More than 20 staff

Q33. How many volunteers serve your organization during an average month?

- 1-5 volunteers
- 6-10 volunteers
- 11-20 volunteers
- More than 20 volunteers

Q34. What is your organization's average annual budget for the last fiscal year?

- \$0-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$149,999
- \$150,000-\$499,999
- \$500,000-\$999,999
- \$1-\$5 million
- More than \$5 million (please specify)

Q35. How long has your organization been in operation?

- 1-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

Q36. Thank you for participating in our survey! Can you think of other BIPOC nonprofit leader(s) in Kent County who you think should participate in this survey? Please forward this survey on to them, we can include them in our research.



Appendix 2: Respondent Individual Demographics Table

Race and Ethnicity	%	Count
Arab/Arab American	5%	2
Asian/Asian American or Pacific Islander	7%	3
Black/African American	68%	28
Latinx/Hispanic	12%	5
Multiracial	5%	2
Native American/Indigenous	0%	0
My race/ethnicity is not represented on this list; please explain:	2%	1
		41
Gender	%	Count
Cis-woman	70%	24
Trans-woman	0%	0
Cis-man	21%	8
Trans-man	0%	0
(Cis or trans) Gender non-binary / gender non-conforming / genderqueer person	3%	1
My gender is not represented on this list; please explain:	6%	2
		35
LGBTQIA2S+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, or other identity)	%	Count
Yes	14%	5
No	86%	30
		35
Age Category	%	Count
18-24 years old	0%	0
25-34 years old	22%	8
35-44 years old	33%	12
45-54 years old	19%	7
55-64 years old	17%	6
65-74 years old	8%	3
75 years old+	0%	0
		36
Has a Disability	%	Count
Yes	8%	3
No	89%	32
Other; please explain:	3%	1
		36
Language(s) Most Comfortable Speaking	%	Count
Arabic	3%	1
Ebonics	3%	1
English	85%	34
Nepali	3%	1
Spanish	8%	3
Monolingual	82%	27
Bilingual	18%	6

Highest Education Level Attained	%	Count
Less than High School	0%	0
High School Diploma (or similar)	8%	3
Associate's Degree	8%	3
Bachelor's Degree	31%	11
Master's Degree	33%	12
Post-Graduate Degree	11%	4
Other (Ed.S in Counseling; Certificate; Some College)	8%	3
		36

Number of Years Working in Nonprofit Field	%	Count
1 year or less	3%	1
2-5 years	22%	8
6-10 years	39%	14
11 years or above	36%	13
		36

Current Role Within Nonprofit Organization	%	Count
Board member	3%	1
Executive director or chief executive officer	83%	30
Operations or non-programming staff	3%	1
Program director or manager	0%	0
Program staff	0%	0
My role is not represented on this list (President; Founder; President/Founder; Founder and Board Member)	11%	4
		36

Part-Time or Full-Time Employee Status	%	Count
Part-time (less than 25 hours)	37%	11
Full-time (greater than 25 hours)	63%	19
		30

Annual Salary from Nonprofit Position	%	Count
I do not receive a salary	44%	16
Below \$9,999	6%	2
\$10,000 to \$24,999	11%	4
\$ 25,000 to \$49,999	8%	3
\$50,000 to \$74,999	11%	4
Greater than \$75,000	19%	7
		36

