

Resident Representation and Power: More than Just a Seat at the Table

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As outreach staff at an East Durham nonprofit, and as a member of the leadership team of a community-led organization in East Durham, I think often about community engagement. I think about getting the word out about existing opportunities in the community, recruiting residents and neighbors to participate, and finally, I think about how to develop opportunities for residents to increase and sustain their engagement and to be a part of decision-making structures of these organizations.

While I have noticed a shift in focus toward increased emphasis on participant feedback and community-identified needs, there seem to be few accessible opportunities for meaningful, sustained engagement within traditional organizational structures (i.e., nonprofit, university or government).

Needs assessments, resident surveys, focus groups, visioning sessions and advisory boards are some examples of the many strategies used by organizations to get feedback from their constituents. These strategies can be very useful when an organization is trying to understand the perceptions and impacts of their services in a community, or to understand what would be most useful or relevant when planning for a new opportunity.

I am not calling into question the importance of prioritizing efforts to integrate feedback from the community into planning and evaluation of services and programs. In fact, here are a few innovative examples of such efforts across the country:

- [GIS-enabled PDAs](#) and [smartphones](#) are being used across the country to allow residents to identify, discuss and report conditions in their neighborhoods
- [Photovoice](#) is being used around the world as tool for people to document their communities' needs and strengths through a medium that crosses language and cultural barriers, and that is often more compelling than words

These examples illustrate strategies that place more power in the hands of community members to tell their stories and share what they know and experience, shifting the power dynamic.

Focus groups and surveys are great tools for gleaning important information to inform and shape decisions, but these tools require that residents answer questions that were developed and asked by the organization or other external parties. Photovoice and other strategies illustrate a different balance of power, where residents are able to identify and show the strengths and needs of their communities the way that they see them, without the influence of the people who are developing and asking the questions.

Taking this power shift a step further, I would argue that residents should not just be asked for their feedback, experiences and ideas, but for their expertise and leadership. In a 2013 blog post on [Philanthropy 2173](#), Lucy Bernholtz, a visiting scholar at Stanford's Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, states that "the people affected by the problem have to help define the solution." Discussing the role of funders and outside experts in planning and evaluating community work, she continues:

Outside funders think they're being 'inclusive' when they involve community members in meetings and brainstorming. Flip this on its head - communities can and should be inclusive about having funders and outside experts participate in their local efforts. Inclusivity cuts both ways and solutions need both insiders and outsiders.

Some funders do take power and community representation seriously. Eligibility guidelines for receiving a Community Development Grant from [the Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#) require that 50% of a nonprofit's governing board must be people who are involuntarily living in

poverty. Funding criteria like this is an effort to combat the tokenism present in rubber stamp community advisory boards, or in a (singular) board seat designated for a community representative. In a 2012 *Nonprofit Quarterly* article, Chao Guo, an Associate Professor of Nonprofit Management in the Penn School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, [writes](#):

Much evidence indicates that even when racially and ethnically diverse individuals are appointed to nonprofit boards, they are not necessarily included as full and equal board members. This suggests that, in order to achieve effective governance, it is far from enough for diverse board members to have a place at the board table: they 'must [also] be welcomed, have their voices heard and opinions valued, and play leadership roles.' From - "The Road Less Traveled: Establishing the Link between Nonprofit Governance and Democracy."

This post is not an effort to condemn more traditional methods to elicit important community feedback. I am sure that many of you have developed or participated in community assessment efforts, and facilitated or were members of community advisory boards. I have done these things, too. However, I am thinking about more significant ways to support resident engagement and power in their communities and in the organizations with which they interact.

The examples and ideas discussed above about community-driven assessment/documentation efforts, and about real representation, energize me to seek better ways to be sure that residents are present, involved and leading decision-making processes that affect them and their families and neighbors.

If you have ideas, or have seen other ways that residents or organizations are addressing this in your communities, please post information below in the comments section.