

# **Association of Fundraising Professionals– Greater Austin Chapter (AFPGA)**

## **Black Professional Fundraisers Focus Groups – November 2021**

*In partnership with Central Texas Black/African American Fundraising Professionals Network (CTXBFP)*

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Background**

In late spring of 2020, the Association of Fundraising Professionals of Greater Austin (AFPGA) Strategic Planning Committee was finalizing its three-year strategic plan and was seeking community inputs as they drew close to completion. Its goal was to incorporate community feedback and insights into the plan to ensure its relevance and future success as a thought leader and influencer of philanthropy in Austin. At the same time, an informal network of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous People of Color) fundraising professionals better known as Central Texas Black/African American Fundraising Professionals Network (CTXBFP) were convening to discuss their experiences as Black, Indigenous, Multi-racial and ethnic individuals in the fundraising profession. These thoughtful discussions took place in the midst of a global health pandemic and in the wake of national racial unrest that ensued following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others by officers of the law.

In response to the AFPGA's request for input, AFPGA officer Karl Nichols, a member of CTXBFP, and CTXBFP Chair, Jacqueline Smith-Francis, hosted two focus groups of CTXBFP members. This summary highlights the questions, answers, and recommendations from the group. This summary also highlights three prominent themes that emerged from focus group discussions that should inform ongoing dialogue and efforts between AFPGA and CTXBFP.

At the request of CTXBFP leaders, AFP reimbursed CTXBFP members for their time and participation in the focus groups. In particular, the payment was made to recognize the value of information conveyed by CTXBFP participants to help AFPGA address issues driven by the historical underrepresentation of racially diverse people in philanthropy. For the record, references in the document to the Association of Fundraising Professionals organization (AFP) aligns with the global organization, its mission, core values, policies, and practices, which all local chapters are intricately tied to like AFPGA.

#### **Focus Group Overview and Participant Information**

On November 10th and 17th of 2021, CTXBFP members Karl Nichols and Jacqueline Smith-Francis, CTXBFP Chair invited CTXBFP members and Black/African American identified fundraising professionals to attend one of two focus groups (in-person at Contigo Austin restaurant and virtually via Zoom).

A total of 15 targeted individuals participated in the focus group sessions. Participants represented expansive levels of education, years of development experience and expertise, type of organizations, and size of development teams. Ninety percent of the participants achieved a college-level education/degree. Seventy-five percent achieved an advanced level degree (MBA, MPA, MA, etc.) and 20% had obtained their doctorates (Ph.D.). The participants' years of development experience ranged from having one or two years of experience to seasoned veterans who had served in the fundraising profession from 10 to more than 25 years. Participants worked for a variety of institutions, including seven nonprofits, five private/public universities, two consulting enterprises, and one local charter school.

Participants came from organizations of varying sizes and operating budgets. As a result, annual fundraising budgets varied widely, ranging from \$100k to over \$35 million. The size and depth of their development teams varied from one-person fundraising shops to large advancement teams, including one senior executive participant who led a staff of twenty-five full-time gift officers (major gifts, planned giving, corporate sponsorships, digital fundraising, etc.). Seven of the participants identified they were active members of AFP.

As a whole, the professional profiles of the focus group participants represented some of the best, brightest, and most qualified and influential fundraisers in the Greater Austin community.

## **Methodology**

On November 10th and 17th of 2021, CTXBFP members Karl Nichols and Jacqueline Smith-Francis, Chair invited CTXBFP members and Black/African -American identified fundraising professionals to attend one of two focus groups (in-person at Contigo Austin restaurant and virtually via Zoom). Each group was asked three questions to gain their impressions and insights on barriers that Black fundraisers in Central Texas experience in philanthropy:

- 1. What are some of the unique challenges and barriers that you face being a Black fundraiser in Central Texas?**
- 2. What do you know about the Association for Fundraising Professionals of Greater Austin Chapter and its events and programs? As a fundraising professional, do you see the value in its programs, services, and membership? Why or why not?**
- 3. What do you think would help attract and encourage more Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) Fundraisers to get involved in the local AFP chapter and to hold leadership positions in AFP?**

A BIPOC fundraiser served as the scribe for each meeting to capture contributors' major suggestions, recommendations, and emergent themes discussed during the focus groups.

## **Responses to Questions:**

Participants responded with the following comments to each question:

### **What are some of the unique challenges and barriers that you face being a BIPOC fundraiser in Central Texas?**

1. As BIPOC fundraisers, we are held to high professional standards by institutional donors, though we are awarded less funding than our white counterparts.
2. There is a huge disparity in how white organizations are funded versus Black, Latina/o, Asian, Multi-Racial or Indigenous -majority run organizations.
3. There is an inequitable distribution of resources and funding opportunities, powered in part by donors who offer “more patience and funding despite the [organization or fundraiser’s] experience or credibility.”
4. The disproportionately smaller annual budgets of Black organizations in Austin (and throughout the country) negatively impact the number of fundraising staff and their professional development, as well as the tertiary resources that an organization can allocate to areas such as marketing, social media/communications and other avenues which bolster an organization’s reach and presence.
5. Group participants identified themselves as professionals who work in hostile environments even when their employers profess to value and uphold “progressive, anti-racist, anti-sexist or anti-homophobic” advancement priorities and organizational values/cultures.

### **What do you know about the Association for Fundraising Professionals of Greater Austin Chapter and its events and programs? As a fundraising professional, do you see the value in its programs, services, and membership? Why or why not?**

1. Involvement in AFP would not necessarily assist us [Black, Multi-cultural, Indigenous fundraisers] with raising more money.
2. Seeing the inequitable distribution of resources and funding opportunities play out in the fundraising landscape encourages us to rely less on institutional organizations like AFP for making strategic connections and more on our interpersonal networks of connection to increase revenue for our organizations.
3. AFIGA is “out of touch” with BIPOC communities’ needs and interests in general. Overall, the organization has not done enough to foster or encourage racial and ethnic inclusivity or diversity.
4. AFP is perceived to have been formed to cater to “privileged white women” who have had the luxury of fundraising or engaging in philanthropy as a hobby.
5. Generally speaking, AFP membership has limited appeal. Professional development opportunities for seasoned veteran fundraisers, and individuals from small development teams and/or small organizational budgets are not compelling enough to spend the money, particularly in instances where organizations do not cover national or local membership dues and participation fees.
6. AFP programming lacks cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, offers limited representation of BIPOC individuals among its leadership and membership ranks, and does not appear to directly address issues of racial inequities in philanthropy.

## **What do you think would help attract and encourage more Black Fundraisers to get involved in the local AFP chapter and to hold leadership positions in AFP?**

1. Create a Black caucus at AFP! Creating a chapter on HTs campus? Invest in the community— strategic mentorship and outreach. For a year minimum.
2. Promote BIPOC representation in AFP Marketing and promotions: BIPOC in photos, language, and marketing promotions to make it clear to AFP members and participants that AFP-sponsored events are a safe place for BIPOC people to navigate.
3. Offer masters level classes: bring in HEAVY HITTERs (e.g. Robert Smith, Elon Musk, Whitney Wolf Herd, etc.) and an exclusive group for seasoned black fundraisers
4. Create a Leadership Fellows program: training for new or potential future gift officers who raise entry-level gifts in one year, targeting diverse populations (to attract young, diverse fundraisers).
5. Appoint a Black President for the chapter. Draws attention; brings people out. Help potential diverse members say, “this is accessible to me.” Make one of their first appointments/directives to meet and liaise with influential Black business owners and/or white organizations who are willing to support/cultivate Black-led initiatives.
6. Create social events for and by Black folks that are inclusive—anyone can attend the events.
7. Be intentional about letting BIPOC professionals lead all of the programming: What would it look like for a whole year if all programming was led by BIPOC people? What types of important and difficult but necessary conversations might come from having experienced fundraising professionals lead and direct all of the workshops and luncheons? BIPOC-partners as vendors and keynote address spokespeople, etc. Recruitment of a BIPOC AFP-undergraduate mentoring program? Think of that level of recruiting.
8. Create a leadership institute just for BIPOC fundraising professionals.
9. Make programming less cost-prohibitive.

## **Precipitating Themes of the Focus Groups**

Three important themes or categories of analysis/focus emerged from the meeting notes, follow-up correspondence and contributions from individuals unable to attend the focus groups and the synthesis of the aforementioned material. An overview of each of the three themes is outlined below, and includes a quote from a participant that encapsulates the sentiment and the centrality of the theme during focus group conversations.

### **Inequity Theme**

*“Nothing has changed. We have to force their hands by our presence and then demand things based on our numbers. We always have to hold white people accountable. We need white people to advocate on our behalf... that equity is important. And it starts with relinquishing power” - Anonymous focus group participant.*

When asked the first question regarding the barriers that black fundraisers face, the issue of systemic and local inequities within the field of fundraising and in philanthropy more generally was a key area of focus and distress for all of the fundraisers who participated in the focus group conversations. Respondents detailed numerous personal accounts and professional testimonies about how they were held to higher professional standards by institutional donors while still receiving less funding than their white counterparts. The idea that there is an uneven and inequitable “playing field” for black fundraisers and black-led organizations was a common theme repeated by participants and an important aspect of why many BIPOC fundraisers felt that their involvement with AFP would not necessarily assist them with raising more money. One participant commented that in their experience, “White organizations are able to leverage their connections,” because of their predominant white leadership or proximity to white led businesses,” which provide them with greater access to people” who have deep pockets or philanthropic capital to share. Another attendee remarked that “There is a huge disparity in how white organizations are funded versus black or other POC-majority run organizations,” stating that for white organizations, because they are often friends, family or colleagues with the donors who give, donors offer “more patience and funding despite their [the organization or fundraiser’s] experience or credibility” said another attendee. For many participants, seeing the inequitable distribution of resources and funding opportunities “play out” in the fundraising landscape, encouraged individual fundraisers to rely less on institutional organizations like AFP for making strategic connections and more on their interpersonal networks of connection (school affiliation, mentors, supportive leaders within their organization, etc.) to increase revenue for their organizations.

Many participants remarked on the institutional inequity that has and continues to shape the economic privileging of white-led or predominantly white institutions (PWIs) over POC-led organizations or organizations who primarily serve people of color. Because of the enduring legacy of white supremacy and its continued reverberations in United States’ societies and city centers, predominantly Black organizations historically have disproportionately smaller annual budgets which not only impacts the number of development staff, it also means that fundraisers who elect to work at an institution primarily led by people of color, more often than not, remain under-resourced in terms of staff, organizational funding for professional development costs (e.g. AFP membership dues, costs for luncheons, etc.) and access to mentors who have the experience and time to show them the necessary steps to building successful fundraising campaigns.

Adding to the obstacles that Black-led organizations and fundraisers face are the “silent and often unspoken challenges” of being identified as a Black/African American, Multi-Cultural or Indigenous professional: 1) they are often assumed not to be the director of fundraising or to have gift advancement experience; 2) their experience is discounted or rendered less valuable or “translatable” because of implicit anti-black bias, both with other fundraising professionals and with donors; 3) they face racist funders who deny their proposals or simply do not return their emails because they are black; 4) Implicit Bias beliefs and stereotypes that suggest BIPOC communities should be happy with “whatever” money they receive; 5) not knowing or having access to ask for feedback from peer fundraisers or the time to attend professional engagement

opportunities because they wear “multiple hats” at the organization; 6) responsibility to meet the same grant or gift reporting guidelines as institutions with double and triple the revenue and staff sizes of smaller, BIPOC-led organization; 7) literally being part of and from Black communities and networks and therefore having less access to certain “taken for granted” advancement opportunities because of racial inequities and anti-Black racism. BIPOC fundraising professionals’ underrepresentation in professional settings is the result of intentional and unintentional (implicit bias) institutional and systems-based discrimination practices that also “play out” in personal arenas. Specifically, BIPOC fundraisers’ disproportionate distance from or lack of access to, friends, family, and professional colleagues who occupy C-suite level executive and partnership positions at majorly financed corporations, institutions of higher education, prominent organizational board appointments, and countless other experiential relationships that assist white fundraisers in their advancement careers.

### **Implicit Bias, Racism, Microaggressions Theme**

*“The unconscious bias of well- intentioned people is a challenge to navigate emotionally and a constant threat to the maintenance of my own mental health” - Anonymous focus group participant.*

Without surprise, the issue area of racial bias, institutional racism, and frequent microaggressions was the second highest ranking theme voiced by focus-group participants. Black fundraisers often identify as professionals who work in hostile work environments even when they work at organizations that profess to value and uphold “progressive, anti-racist, anti-sexist or anti-homophobic agendas” and organizational values/cultures. In fact, there was general consensus amongst focus group participants that an individual’s proximity to whiteness closely correlates with their ability to obtain material reward and success as a fundraiser. Your success as fundraiser is your ability to act, look, and behave “white” or in non-threatening ways which include downplaying or choosing not to adopt standards associated with Black and Multi-racial communities, such as brighter lipstick and makeup shades or colors, natural hairstyles, vernacular speech, and non/verbal displays (e.g. a raised voice, hand-gestures, and facial expressions, etc.) that can be and have historically been labeled by white groups as “angry.” Moreover, many felt that simply voicing their opinions was often met with criticisms rooted in implicit bias, such as: “Why don’t you feel comfortable going to a fundraising engagement?” “I like your hair better, ‘the other way’ ”, being ignored by white staff or funders when in a group with other fundraisers, and having to quickly adopt expertise and a level of comfort with “being ‘the only one’”. Additionally, group participants expressed their experiences with receiving and overhearing microaggressions related to events in the news: “why are they protesting;” what’s wrong with ‘The Eyes of Texas’ song” and many other non/verbal microaggressions, statements and behaviors that belittled BIPOC identities, communities, cultures.

It became clear that many attendees felt they needed distance from their professional environments because of the personas necessary to maintain their professional identities and the frequency in which they were often met with a barrage of routine insults, microaggressions, and other insensitive behaviors in work environments and professional arenas. The question of, “where do black fundraisers go to insulate themselves from the dangers and frequent assaults

on their humanity,” became a rhetorical refrain and mutually shared experience that no one could really answer, other than they definitely found more personal and professional solace in places and spaces with more diversity. Although attendees’ acknowledged that progress has been made in providing more DEI trainings in the workplace and that organizations are striving to move towards greater racial equity, the majority of focus group participants recalled several vivid and recent experiences in which they experienced microaggressions and racial bias in their workplace environments and/or with funders/donors.

**Tokenism and Double Standards Theme:**

*Definition: the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of gender, sexuality or racial equality within a workforce.*

Many participants spoke about how they were still seen or recruited to be the only one on their development team or representative on an organizational board of directors. “We are still the unicorns in a lot of ways” said one participant. If BIPOC individuals are fortunate to be the sole representative in their department or organization, they are literally bombarded with bold questions or required to provide information that crosses the line on what is ethical, decent, and fair. One senior level fundraiser said “I am truly perplexed by the “white wokeness” behaviors that gives white folks the audacious permission to ask very private, intimate, and offensive details about my life experiences as a black fundraiser. This violates my space and sense of dignity as a person and professional. You (white people) are not asked to provide that in your roles, why should I”. Participants spoke to the double standards applied to them both within and outside of their organizations. Black fundraisers experience the pressure of performing at higher professional standards than their white colleagues. “We are doing harder work; navigating the white dominant culture, and still expected to exceed expectations in fundraising” said one attendee. As another attendee said, “We can’t go to our bosses without having to defend ourselves and explain why we feel this way as we experience bias and discrimination in the workplace”.

As we briefly described in these high-level themes, BIPOC fundraisers expressed some of the same truths and struggles faced by individuals and communities of African descent since slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, integration, and even today. Therefore, they cannot simply divorce their professional lived experiences from the horrors of institutional racism that have existed for over 400 years in the United States and continue to shape their professional and personal lives today.

**AFP in the Mirror**

There were two predominant perspectives or views about the AFP Greater Austin Chapter that emerged as important focal points during the focus groups. The first was the idea that AFPGA is “out of touch” with BIPOC communities’ needs and interests in general and that overall, the organization has not done enough to foster or encourage inclusivity or diversity by developing organizational strategies to reach people of color or to encourage their involvement and

participation until very recently. As said by one attendee, “It was this way [predominantly white led and majority white membership] ten years ago and remains the same today!”. There was a perception that the organization was formed to cater to “privileged white women” who have had the luxury of fundraising or engaging in philanthropy as a hobby (Junior Leaguers) while their affluent husbands or family foundations give to the charities of their choice. In other words, the perception of AFP as an organization that was started by wealthy women and continued to adopt a model of “ladies that lunch” who are already connected to and part of wealthy communities, making it easy and almost “fun” for them to engage in “charitable work”, dissuaded many participants from either paying for an AFP membership or participating in membership events. Several members remarked that they would not necessarily have joined AFP if their organization did not pay for their membership. For the majority of black fundraisers, this profession literally represents like most employment for BIPOC individuals, a primary and necessary vehicle to earn money for their family and advance their career. The risks are much higher if they are not successful in this profession unlike their white counterparts.

Secondly, although AFP does offer quality trainings, good networking opportunities, and volunteer leadership roles, the second predominant perception by the group was the association does not bring a lot of professional development opportunities for seasoned veteran fundraisers or for fundraisers who did not have large enough development teams or organizational budgets where they could regularly attend meetings or participate in a leadership role with AFP. In other words, AFP caters to the “mainstream/predominantly white” fundraiser who is affiliated with a PWI organization who can pay for their membership and attendance at luncheons and professional development workshops or who can finance their own membership because of either their salaries or combined salaries of partners and family members. Participants felt that AFP had in the past and recently created unnecessary or unintended barriers for BIPOC fundraisers’ involvement such as the following: costly fees to join and then participate in on-going workshops; a lack of culturally sensitive programming, limited representation of BIPOC individuals in the membership ranks and leadership, and AFP leadership choosing to avoid and directly address issues of racial inequities in philanthropy. Moreover, some participants expressed needing to see more BIPOC fundraisers, other fundraisers of color, and more investment by AFP to cater to diverse cultural interests before determining that an annual AFP membership was a worthwhile professional and financial investment.

## **Conclusion**

The Executive Summary is a collaborative document that reflects the professional acumen, knowledge, and experiential accounts of Black fundraising professionals working in Central Texas. The purpose of the document is to share Black individuals’ experiences of fundraising in Central Texas with AFP Greater Austin Chapter leadership and to provide informative, qualitative data regarding the reasons that many Black professionals have elected not to participate in the local chapter or national membership opportunities. Lastly, the Executive Summary offers as resolution, strategies and first-steps to conducting outreach to, with, and in conversation with Black fundraisers and to developing initiatives, programming, content, and



social engagements (often the taken for granted aspects of space, place and taste that define cultural/racial identities) into the Chapter's 2021-2023 Strategic Plan.

The Central Texas Black/African American Fundraising Network appreciates the AFP Greater Austin Chapter's expressed commitment to the diversity, inclusivity and equitable inclusion of Black fundraisers. Thank you for providing CTXBFP with the opportunity to provide recommendations and feedback regarding the Chapter's strategic plan and efforts/intentions to commit and increase diversity within the local chapter's leadership and membership.

Respectfully,

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