

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

## Diversity Is Not Enough in Fundraising Offices

How nonprofits are creating more inclusive workplaces for fundraisers of color.

By Eden Stiffman | APRIL 6, 2021

The first two decades of Tycely Williams's nonprofit career were filled with largely positive working experiences. But when she became chief development officer at the American Red Cross's National Capital and Greater Chesapeake Region in 2015, the veteran fundraiser was the only Black woman in a leadership position.

"There were very few people who looked like me," Williams says. "Many of the tactics that were in place worked for white people. The culture was shaped by white people. The measures of success were defined by white people."

Nonprofits have learned the hard way that if fundraisers of color don't feel welcome, they won't stay. Some organizations are working hard to become more inclusive.

No matter what approach she took as a leader, it was difficult to get her colleagues on board. When she tried to lead her team from the front, she was told she was "too aggressive" and "wasn't bringing people along." When she tried to lead from the side, she was told, "You're not showing enough leadership; your team needs more from you." When she tried to lead from behind, the response was, "You're not showing that you're capable and competent or prepared," she says.

Just three months in, she says, she realized she would not have the support or respect she needed to succeed and that the job would be "an emotionally and psychologically draining experience, a very heavy and a very hard professional journey."

Williams's experience echoes that of many other fundraisers of color. Development departments are often white-dominated, and it's not uncommon for a professional of color to be the only one in the room. That can create many challenges: Fundraisers say they have been belittled by donors, board members, and colleagues. Meanwhile, organizations are losing credibility among their increasingly diverse pools of potential supporters.

Fundraising has a lot of work to do when it comes to attracting and retaining professionals of color. In 2019, about 13 percent of 9,254 Association of Fundraising Professionals members who answered a question about their racial or ethnic background self-identified as

other than Caucasian. [A 2020 survey from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources](#) found that 13 percent of midlevel professionals in university fundraising positions identified their race or ethnicity as nonwhite.



Tycely Williams is chief development officer at America's Promise Alliance

Nonprofits have been talking about diversity for a long time. Since the killing of George Floyd last May, many organizations have said they intend to improve on diversity, equity, and inclusion goals and move from awareness to meaningful action. But making sure people feel included and nurturing a sense of belonging require a level of intention most haven't mustered. Truly inclusive fundraising departments where employees of color can thrive remain elusive.

"You can attract a diverse group of professionals all day and night, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're going to feel welcome when they arrive," says Angelique Grant, vice president and certified diversity recruiter at the Aspen Leadership Group. "If no one really wants to be inclusive, what does it really matter if it's diverse at that point?"

Williams, the former Red Cross fundraiser, recognized that her workplace had a culture that wanted to preserve and protect the status quo by asking people of color to carry out strategies defined by white people, she says. She stayed in the job for 14 months — her shortest stint in any professional role.

"Even though I had a chief development officer title, I wasn't operating in an environment where power was being shared or adequately distributed," she says. "It was a culture of do as we say, not as you think."

### Nontraditional Backgrounds

People talk about fundraising's pipeline problem — that there are not enough professional fundraisers of color. But that shouldn't be an obstacle to finding solutions, says Peter Hayashida, president of the UC Riverside Foundation.

There may not be enough fundraisers of color now, but there's a lot the nonprofit world can do to turn that around, Hayashida says. He believes one of the biggest challenges is the laser focus on short-term funding needs.

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“The profession needs to look beyond ‘I can’t worry about DEI today because I have a fundraising goal to meet and I just have to hire the best people,’” he says. “That’s all code for ‘I’m going to hire the people who’ve already done the job,’ which by definition means ‘I’m going to hire more people who look like the people I already have.’”



Peter Hayashida, president of the UC Riverside Foundation,

As fundraising has professionalized, hiring managers increasingly look for candidates with development experience, even though many seasoned fundraisers fell into this work themselves.

The All Stars Project, a nonprofit that uses performing arts — singing, acting, dancing — to help young people in poor communities build successful lives, has committed to hiring staff with nontraditional and diverse backgrounds. The organization invests in training and support for those with transferable skills but no formal fundraising experience, including alumni of its programs. Many staff members are involved in fundraising, but of the 10 full-time fundraisers and 10 executive leaders who work with donors, 40 percent identify as people of color and 60 percent as white.

Founded by civil-rights and community activists 40 years ago, the All Stars Project works to live its mission of developing leaders with both the young people it serves and staff members. As the organization expanded from New York to offer programs in Chicago, Dallas, New Jersey, and the San Francisco Bay Area, it’s maintained a structure of multiracial teams who often collaborate during donor meetings.

A significant portion of the All Stars Project team came in without traditional fundraising experience, says Chris Street, the group’s president, who previously served as chief development officer and joined the organization back in the early 1990s as its third employee. “We’re really interviewing for value fit, not just technique or experience.”

Multiracial teams interview candidates for fundraising positions. “When we’re interviewing people, they see that we have promoted alumni from our programs to the highest ranks of management,” Street says.

That culture of investing in employees’ success has helped keep staff in the fold.

Patricio Delgado spent several years working as a crisis counselor in New Jersey after he graduated from college. He attended an event hosted by the All Stars Project where he spoke to teenagers in the nonprofit’s programs. “They were just so much more hopeful than any other young person I’ve spoken to in the Newark community about the things that they could do in their lives and the opportunities available to them,” he recalls. That resonated with Delgado, who is Latino, grew up in Jersey City, and shares many lived experiences with the young people the group serves.

He began volunteering with the nonprofit. When a fundraising manager role in the New York office opened up a year later, in 2015, leaders at the organization encouraged him to apply.

“I had no fundraising experience,” he says. But he got the job, which gave him the opportunity to work with both major donors and small-dollar supporters and learn about event management. All Stars invested in his professional development both formally and informally. The nonprofit sent him to attend conferences and workshops. And he regularly sat down with more seasoned fundraisers who helped him hone his pitch to donors and develop a narrative about the charity’s impact.



Patricio Delgado got a fundraising management job at the All Stars Project despite having no fundraising experience, but the group invested in his professional development, both formally and informally.

Delgado left for a little more than a year for a fundraising position at another youth organization. But in 2019, All Stars hired him back in a senior role: director of corporate and foundation relations.

The organization’s commitment to employees’ growth was one of the reasons he returned. “I have been able to continue to grow in my role and continue to grow in my responsibility because we have such a strong investment in building internal leaders,” Delgado says. “The investment was really, in my mind, a way to say, ‘We want to continue to support and nurture young leaders, especially young leaders of color.’”

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## Culture of Collaboration

Fundraisers throughout the organization say the All Stars Project's commitment to "radical inclusion" has allowed them to thrive. The organization works hard to make sure leaders are accessible and staff members never feel like they're alone. That support allows them to grow, face difficult situations, and feel a sense of ownership in their work.

Shadae McDaniel joined the group in 2015, after working at other nonprofits for more than 15 years. As a program director in Newark, she quickly took on more and more fundraising responsibility. "Our program's success — and the way I can talk about it — equal investment in our organization," she says. She started putting herself in more situations in which she could share her passion for the organization's work with potential supporters. "It helped me realize that I've been a fundraiser this whole time."

It's not uncommon for McDaniel to be the youngest person, the only Black person, and the only woman in the room, she says. From time to time, wealthy potential board members or donors make uninformed or racist comments about what poor people need — like suggesting the nonprofit hold a clothing or food drive for the young people it serves.

"To me, those type of comments are racist because at the core what they're saying is, 'People in the inner-city communities we serve, which are Black and brown kids mostly, are in need of particular things that other young people aren't in need of,'" McDaniel says. "They assume that poor people are incompetent and don't know what they need."

Because of the nonprofit's focus on collaboration, McDaniel is usually joined by at least one colleague during these conversations. When supporters make insensitive comments, her colleagues are prepared to step in to support her or debrief after the fact.

"If I don't think I can respond to something because of who I am in the room, I bet you a dollar that my development officer would feel fine saying something," she says. "You can bring all of your worry and concern and there's going to be people on the other side of the table who are saying, 'I hear you. How can we address that?'"

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signals that I'm just tolerating my team.*

*I want them to know that I see you,  
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— Shadae McDaniel

That deep sense of trust comes as a result of the organization's deliberate efforts to build ties between people who come from different backgrounds and typically don't come together, she says. That intimacy between staff members happens through hard conversations about the different identities colleagues bring to their roles. "If people aren't creating intimacy and empathy, the environment's just not going to change," she says. "We have to create the environment where people can come together."

Over the last six years, she has risen in the ranks to become vice president and city leader of the All Stars Project of New Jersey. Along the way, she's become a fundraising leader for the organization, helping spearhead a group of colleagues who strategize about the future of the organization's fundraising and growth. McDaniel says she feels a sense of ownership and belonging. "I get reaffirmed often about who I am and why who I am is important in the conversation," she says. "I feel like I'm a co-creator of culture here."

## Matter of Credibility

Since he joined the UC Riverside Foundation in 2009, Hayashida has worked to diversify his own team from one that was largely white to one that reflects the racial and ethnic demographics of the nation. Of the 40 fundraisers on staff right now, 45 percent identify as nonwhite.

That diversity is critical to his institution's ability to build trust with supporters. "If we don't start looking more like our student bodies, we will lose credibility," he says. "When we go out seeking support, people will say, 'You say you care about students of color, but I don't see any people coming to talk to me who seem to have a lived experience that would give them insight into what my experience might have been like as a Black student at UC Riverside in the 1970s.'"

Building an inclusive culture must begin during the recruitment process when prospective employees meet with other staff members and leaders, he says. "That's my opportunity to talk about our values, our commitment to community and belonging, and our focus on learning and growth," Hayashida says.

Cause Effective, a nonprofit that consults with charities to improve fundraising and governance, examined the [barriers to success fundraisers of color](#) face in a 2019 report. Many expressed frustration with the lack of support from their supervisors and colleagues in navigating issues of race, power, and class.

"I mostly experience sound bites about inclusion and the work that needs to be done, but it doesn't ever become actualized," one fundraiser told the authors.

While leaders must talk about DEI often, Hayashida says, actions speak louder than words. "People will listen to what you're saying, but if they don't see things happening that are mirroring your words, then it just becomes pabulum and people stop paying attention."

One way the UC Riverside Foundation telegraphs the importance of action: Starting last year, it evaluates contributions to diversity and community in the workplace as part of performance reviews for managers. The approach will be adapted for other fundraising staff evaluations this year.

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## Brave Conversations

Inclusion councils — groups of employees who help their organization make the best decisions by tapping into the perspectives offered by a diverse team — are one strategy for holding an organization accountable to its DEI goals.

More and more organizations have created these groups or refocused their efforts over the past year, says Grant, of the Aspen Leadership Group, who co-wrote the [recently published book \*Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Advancement\*](#). To be effective, it's important that these volunteer efforts have a budget tied to them and the participation of a senior leader on the council, Grant says. "Then it doesn't become an 'us and them' but a 'we.'"



Courtney Ross, who works in development at Ohio State, chairs a committee that works to encourage conversations about race and equity. She says there's a long way to go, but she's seen changes in the past year.

Four years ago, the Ohio State University advancement department hadn't done much formal staff training on diversity and inclusion, says Steph Mizer, the department's lead recruiter. When Mizer was named the department's chief diversity officer in 2017, she began to form its Advancement Inclusion Council.

The department provided implicit bias training for all fundraising staff and more focused training for hiring managers on how to mitigate bias in the interview process. The council organized some cultural awareness events and worked to educate staff on language about diversity issues and the department's DEI goals. Two years later, the council became more formal with staff taking on officer roles and leading committees focused on four main areas: raising awareness, embracing differences, encouraging brave conversations, and prioritizing diversity and inclusion in hiring and retention practices.

During last summer's racial reckoning, the inclusion council held all-staff discussions about what was happening in the country. "We felt really good to have a structure in place where we could be flexible and pivot to the immediate needs of dealing with the race conversation," Mizer says. Around 240 staff participated in the first event on Zoom, suggesting a significant appetite for such conversations.

Courtney Ross, director of development at the College of Engineering, chairs the committee working to encourage brave conversations. Ross

and her committee suggested the department follow up with intimate small-group discussions led by colleagues trained as facilitators. The first round focused on employees' experiences in the workplace related to race. The second round looked at how to be an ally.

Ross, a Black woman, says she's seen changes over the past year. "I do not think we would have been having these conversations prior to May 2020," she says. "We certainly talked about needs around supporting diversity efforts or initiatives, but I'm not sure we had conversations like 'What's your experience like with race?' or 'How are you feeling right now?'"

She hopes the intimacy of the small-group conversations leads to larger changes in how members of the advancement team relate to each other — that if a colleague says or does something offensive or inappropriate, others will feel empowered to speak up and address it. The goal is to get to a point where colleagues trust each other more and can talk about diversity openly and freely, Ross says. "It's about all of us getting better together. It's about how you use your platform and your privilege to advance someone else."

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— Courtney Ross

There's a lot of work to do, she says, and it will take time.

"Culture change is not a six-month plan or a 12-month plan," she says. "It's a slow ripple effect, and it sometimes takes time for that ripple to reach everyone or to be implemented across the entire organization."

## 'Open to Learning'

Inclusion councils — groups of employees who help their organization make the best decisions by tapping into the perspectives offered by a diverse team — are one strategy for holding an organization accountable to its DEI goals.

Williams, the former Red Cross fundraiser who felt sidelined despite her director role, credits that difficult period in her life for launching her into race-equity work within the profession and shaping the way she leads. In 2018, she was tapped as the founding chair of AFP's Women's Impact Initiative, an effort that focuses on issues like sexual harassment, pay equity, and leadership gaps.

Responding to an inquiry from the Chronicle, a spokesman for the Red Cross chapter said that the charity's current leadership "puts diversity and inclusion as a top priority."

In December 2019, Williams became chief development officer at America's Promise Alliance, a nonprofit that brings together other charities, foundations, corporations, civic leaders, policy makers, and others to help young people succeed.

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She has worked to build a fundraising unit from scratch virtually since the pandemic began. Today her team of three full-time fundraisers includes one woman of color. She also works with five consultants, two of whom are women of color.

The leadership team is deeply invested in becoming an anti-racist organization. America's Promise received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to hire consultants to provide targeted coaching and training to senior leaders to bring equity and inclusion into decision-making processes. A staff-led DEI task force is focused on advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the nonprofit's culture and processes. Another team is working to map out an anti-racist approach throughout its alliance of partners.

On the fundraising team, the training has led to changes. Job descriptions now disclose salary ranges for all positions and include language that signals the culture Williams and other leaders aim to foster: "The successful candidate must be willing to teach and open to learn."

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– CTyccely Williams

America's Promise is seeking a new director of development. Williams will not participate in the early stages of the search. That way, she says, she won't provide an unfair advantage to candidates she's built relationships with during her 25 years in fundraising and holds in high esteem. She met with human resources and members of her team to underscore the qualities, traits, and experiences that are imperative for a successful candidate.

All qualified candidates will be asked to answer a brief set of questions. The two-person human-resource team will decide whether to advance candidates based on the answers to those questions as well as the information on their résumés. The idea is to level the playing field by establishing a consistent measure for evaluating candidates while de-emphasizing elements of résumés that may bias a reviewer, like names, educational institutions, or a lapse in employment.

Williams says she's committed to creating an environment in which all staff members, regardless of the power they hold, have opportunities to lead as they see fit. She avoids being overly prescriptive and aims to support her team with the resources they need to be successful.

"I certainly want to do more than send signals that I'm just tolerating my team," Williams says. "I want them to know that I see you, I applaud you, and I'm proud of you."