

understanding the causes behind systems-level data

STORIES FROM THE NETWORK

Promise Partnership | Salt Lake region, Utah

*from
A guide to race and ethnic
equity systems indicators*

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understanding the causes behind systems-level data

STORIES FROM THE NETWORK

Promose Partnership at the United Way of Salt Lake is using a liberatory design approach to add context to the stories behind systems-level data.

These indicators are featured or discussed in this story:

- Financial barriers to postsecondary enrollment
- Inclusive communities & neighborhoods

Story sections

- Using liberatory design | [link](#)
- Liberatory Design and fellowship | [link](#)
- The strategies | [link](#)
- Other examples | [link](#)
- Challenging the status quo | [link](#)
- Importance of community voice | [link](#)
- Collaborative action networks | [link](#)
- Conclusion | [link](#)

using liberatory design

- ▶ For Promise Partnership at United Way of Salt Lake, the work of the past 10 years has resulted in a robust structure to capture outcomes data. Successes to celebrate include strong data agreements with partners and detailed data collection.

But in the last few years, Promise Partnership realized that although the gathered data “tells us a lot,” according to Amy Terpstra, vice president of collective partnerships, what was missing was context. Promise Partnership made it their new goal to learn the stories behind the data.

“I don’t think we were trying to measure the system itself, but we started to ask questions about what conditions in a school make it successful,” said Terpstra, referring to aspects like school culture, leadership and teacher efficacy.

A few reflective questions led them to the Liberatory Design model, now used in many of Promise Partnership’s initiatives, including within the partnership itself. This approach not only prioritizes the community and the experiences of those most impacted but also complements the partnership’s focus on systems indicators — which helps accelerate progress toward equitable results.



liberatory design and fellowship

- ▶ The Liberatory Design approach was developed in 2016 by the National Equity Project and the Stanford d.school's K12 Lab, an education-focused creativity hub within the university's design school. The [set of beliefs](#) that drive Liberatory Design focuses on redesigning systems for equity and prioritizes “the meaningful participation of those impacted by equity.”

Promise Partnership first began to use Liberatory Design in its [Grassroots Leadership program](#), which creates leadership development opportunities for community members and leverages its partnership with the local school district. Community members can apply for fellowships lasting six months to engage in this work.

Angela Chozo, a 2019 fellow, worked on a few different projects during her time with the leadership team, but the most memorable for her was organizing a college readiness workshop for Spanish-speaking parents. In an [interview](#) on United Way of Salt Lake's blog, Chozo recounts a parent thanking her for organizing the event:

“She said that her kid wants to go back to school and that the information we shared helped so much with understanding how to apply for scholarships and what options he had available. That was so emotional because that right there was the reason why I wanted to do the workshop.”

– Angela Chozo

the strategies

- ▶ Senior Director of Grassroots Leadership Development Igor Limansky emphasized the connection between Liberatory Design and community engagement:

“The most important thing [about the approach] is that you're centering the voices of community members. All of the projects you see were generated by community organizers. They're choosing the projects that impact them.”

– Igor Limansky

In addition to the college readiness workshop, fellows have organized a series of early learning workshops for Spanish-speaking parents and researched resources available to undocumented postsecondary students, for example.

Limansky described Liberatory Design as, essentially, “human-centered design.” He and Luis Miranda, director of grassroots capacity building, both have backgrounds in Liberatory Design — Limansky's training came from an Obama Foundation fellowship — and started integrating the model into their work. When funding came through from a Gates

Foundation technical assistance grant, they hired a consultant specializing in Liberatory Design to further guide their work.

United Way of Salt Lake's Grassroots Leadership program is based in Liberatory Design and their version of the **Community Engagement Spectrum**, a framework that helps organizations determine better ways to engage with the community. The combination of both models not only helps the partnership work with communities but also empowers communities to be decision makers.

Abdi Iftin, a former Grassroots Leadership fellow who came to the United States in 2005 as a refugee from Somalia, was always interested in community service and “how to build strong communities for the better,” but he didn't know how to do so until participating in the fellowship.

“The internship helped me identify opportunities of the community that I live in, and I was able to strengthen it by starting to address challenges parents and families face,” Iftin wrote on United Way of Salt Lake's

blog. “We were able to build bridges within the communities the United Way of Salt Lake serves and overcome the language barriers that exist between United Way and the communities around us.”

other examples

- ▶ Liberatory Design is used specifically in projects that involve community feedback, Limansky said. For example, the model has helped them develop ways to more effectively recruit and work with community members for research projects, such as making sure to properly compensate community members sharing their knowledge and experiences. The model is also implemented in United Way of Salt Lake’s community research participation webpage, which has been designed to clearly communicate with community members and make information on research opportunities accessible.

Another use of Liberatory Design in the Grassroots Leadership program was when United Way of Salt Lake created archetypes — avoiding stereotypes — of community members to evaluate a school’s modes of communication.

The team ran each of the archetypes through the school’s modes of communication and analyzed user experience, keeping in mind the local population of migrants and refugees who don’t speak English.

“We know once we create a user journey, we’ve got to be aware that if a school’s main mode of communication is a letter in English, the moment it goes to a user that doesn’t actually have the ability to read the letter in English, we know that mode of communication hits a wall,” Limansky said.

After using this model within the Grassroots Leadership program, United Way of Salt Lake secured funding to implement it elsewhere, including within the organization itself.

“It’s generally very difficult to see that you need to change your own system,” Terpstra said, acknowledging both the challenge and importance of this work.

“Liberatory Design helps surface a view of systems from the perspective of those experiencing the weight [of systems], leading to new insights about how to change them.”

– Amy Terpstra

Limansky added, “Questions about employee raises, affinity groups or anything that’s policy — in that case, the people most impacted are going to be staff. So if the board is going to be making decisions, [the staff] should have a voice and, hopefully, a vote.”

challenging the status quo

- ▶ Because the work of changing long-standing mental models — both conscious and subconscious — is baked into Liberatory Design itself, using it as a design model is not without its challenges. Some mental models may not value community voices, for example, or consider the experiences of those most impacted. The United Way of Salt Lake tests some measures internally before releasing them to the public.

This work also requires strong relationships that simultaneously challenge the status quo and build trust, both within the organization and within systems of board directors, executives and other partners.

“[You need to] cultivate a relationship that’s great and healthy and then, importantly, push them to create differently.”

- Amy Terpstra

One way United Way of Salt Lake does this is by identifying key leaders that the organization already has good relationships with. This ensures that vulnerability is part of growing the Liberatory Design model in external projects.

Limansky also discussed the importance of having enough people in their own leadership with strong external relationships, who can, in turn, champion racial equity. “There’s been a continual effort to figure out how to have better conversations [with

community leaders],” Limansky said. “Like any organization, we have different personalities and different perspectives, and we have to make sure we respect each other in those conversations.”

With equity at the center of these conversations, the team at United Way of Salt Lake invites partners and collaborators to reflect on their mental models. The team has introduced the Dismantling Racism framework by Tema Okun to staff, board members and community members and acknowledges that this type of learning is an ongoing journey.

Relationship building is also essential within the communities themselves.

“Our intention was always to make sure we’re hiring people who are from the communities we’re working with,” Limansky said, describing how United Way of Salt Lake makes sure to pay organizers — some of whom are refugees — a living wage to continue the organizing work they were already doing. He also described meetings where the organization showed up to listen and provide expertise as needed, as well as food-filled potlucks held for community members before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“A coconut flan can go a long way,” Limansky said, reminiscing about building relationships in pre-pandemic times.



importance of community voice

- ▶ Since the Grassroots Fellowship's inception and the use of Liberatory Design began, United Way of Salt Lake has taken themselves and their community on a journey of equity and community engagement, growing into the model along the way.

"United Way was able to help me by giving me the tools, the skills," said Iftin. "It became very comfortable for me and my community because I was the one who grew up there, and they were excited to see [a member of their own community as] the one that's actually doing the work."

At the time of Iftin's 2019 blog post, he was looking forward to graduating from Salt Lake Community College the following month. The first-generation college student hoped to earn a degree in social work or psychology from the University of Utah. Even while moving on, he emphasized the importance of a program

where "people like me have the opportunity to build up communities from within and allow voices to be heard that often are not."

The need to engage community voices seemed more obviously present at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The Grassroots Leadership team developed a plan to conduct interviews with minority-owned small businesses, with the goal of assessing the effects of the pandemic on their operations. When the results came in, the team found much more than struggling businesses: feedback from small business owners showed an interconnected web of issues related to children's school performance, including health and financial issues.

The business report findings highlighted the interconnectedness of the community and disparities that existed long before COVID-19.

collaborative action networks

- ▶ For United Way of Salt Lake, listening to what the community says it needs and ensuring that their lived experiences reach systems leaders continues to be a work in progress. Relatedly, the use of Liberatory Design, like other community engagement models, is an ongoing process — one that requires commitment to continued learning and improvement.

Because United Way of Salt Lake uses Liberatory Design primarily as an organizing

tool, providing qualitative data to collaborative action networks and administrators hasn't been a focus. But they continue to work to that end.

"The ability to bring those two together is hard. The question for us is: after we gather this information, how are we going to get [collaborative action networks] to listen to the research?"

- Igor Limansky

conclusion

- ▶ For now, they've adjusted their model within the fellowship so that during the first two months of the fellowship, projects will be initiated by the collaborative action network. In the remaining four months, organizing fellows will initiate projects.

Limansky hopes this approach will "build better relationships between those making

the decisions and those being impacted by the decisions." The work of systems change, he acknowledges, continues to evolve: "We as United Way of Salt Lake have relationships and levers that we can pull, but there needs to be more of a conversation upfront about how that happens. That's what we're growing into."