

Nurturing Possibility Through Participatory Grantmaking

The 2025 Community Experts Team Evaluation Report
for the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation



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Table of Contents

- Executive Summary..... **4**
- 1. Framing the Vision: Founders, CET, and the Promise of Possibility **8**
 - 1.1 The Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation: A Legacy of Dignity and Possibility..... **8**
 - 1.2 The Community Experts Team and Community Experts Fund **8**
 - 1.3 CET in the Broader Context of Participatory Grantmaking..... **9**
 - 1.4 Framing Question and Key Evaluation Questions..... **10**
- 2. Evaluation Frameworks: Learning, Equity, and Shared Power in Philanthropy **12**
 - 2.1 Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ **12**
 - 2.2 Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation **13**
 - 2.3 Developmental Evaluation and Emergent Learning **13**
 - 2.4 CET Learning and Outcomes Framework..... **14**
- 3. Evaluation Approach, Methods, and Data Sources **16**
 - 3.1 Mixed-Methods, Concurrent, and Participatory Approach..... **16**
 - 3.2 Key Evaluation Questions and Learning Questions **16**
 - 3.3 Data Sources and Collection Strategies **17**
 - 3.4 Anonymity, Role Labels, and How to Read This Report **19**
 - 3.5 Limitations and How to Interpret the Findings **20**
- 4. What We Heard: Participation, Leadership, Equity, and Experience **21**
 - 4.1 Participation & Power-Sharing **21**
 - 4.2 Empowerment & Leadership Development..... **22**
 - 4.3 Equity & Accessibility **23**
 - 4.4 Processes, Communication, and Supports **25**
 - 4.5 Participant Outcomes and Pathways..... **26**
 - 4.6 Benchmarking and Field-Level Insight..... **29**
- 5. CET as an Expression of Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ **33**
 - 5.1 Alignment with YPP Elements..... **33**
 - 5.2 CET Learning and Outcomes Frameworks in Practice **34**

6. Implications & Recommendations	35
6.1 Nurturing Possibility for Community Experts (CET Design & Facilitation).....	35
6.2 Nurturing Possibility within the Tower Foundation (Strategy & Practice)	38
6.3 Nurturing Possibility in the Field (External Learning & Influence).....	39
7. Nurturing Possibility Forward: CET’s Evolving Legacy and Most Promising Future.....	41
Acknowledgments.....	42
8. References	43
9. About The L.E.A.D. Agency and Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler	44
10. Appendices	45
Appendix A. Data Collection Overview	45
Appendix B. CET and Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ Alignment Table.....	46
Appendix C. Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report—May 2025	47
Appendix D. CET Virtual Meeting Observation Tools.....	60

CET members pay a visit to a recent grantee, Massachusetts Audubon, at the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary.



Executive Summary

The Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation’s Community Experts Team (CET) represents a bold commitment to reimagining philanthropy—moving beyond inclusion toward authentic shared leadership. CET recognizes that leadership, wisdom, and innovation already reside within neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences. Through CET and the Community Experts Fund, the Tower Foundation is not simply funding programs; it is nurturing possibility.

In 2025, approximately 15 Community Experts—young adult community members with lived experience connected to the Foundation’s focus areas—served as a core grantmaking structure. CET members co-designed the 2025 Community Experts Fund Request for Proposals (RFP), helped shape funding priorities, reviewed applications, and made final grant decisions for approximately \$350,000 in awards. Their work is supported by Tower Foundation staff; Referral, Support, and Review Partners; and trustees who continue to champion the model.

This evaluation was designed as a concurrent, mixed-methods, and participatory study to learn alongside the 2025 CET cohort. It sought not only to document outcomes, but to surface insights that would strengthen possibility-centered participation, systemic equity, and shared learning over time.

At the center of this evaluation is the framing question:

What will it take to ensure that the Community Experts Team (CET) program advances equity and participation in ways that meaningfully reflect, respond to, and are shaped by the lived experiences of its participants?

“*It wasn’t pretend power. We had real conversations, disagreed sometimes, and then our decision was the final one.*”

– Current CET member

Evaluation Framework

The evaluation is grounded in four complementary frameworks:

- **Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ (YPP)**—A framework (Butler, 2023) that positions youth and lived-experience leaders as architects of systems change, focusing on possibility development, leadership pathways, and shared decision-making.
- **Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CRE Evaluation)**—Centering cultural context, accessibility, and equity in how questions are asked, whose knowledge is valued, and how findings are interpreted.
- **Developmental Evaluation (Patton, 2010)**—Supporting innovation and adaptation in dynamic initiatives, with real-time feedback and iterative learning.
- **Emergent Learning**—Treating unexpected developments not as problems to fix but as essential insights, emphasizing continuous reflection and “learning forward.”

These frameworks are reflected in the CET Learning Framework (Lived Expertise, Voice, Shared Leadership, Equity and Inclusion, and Trust-Based Relationships) and the CET Outcomes Framework (participant, foundation, and community outcomes). Together, they position CET as both a participatory grantmaking structure and a space where possibility and leadership can emerge in ways that fit each participant.

These practices resonate with Trust-Based Philanthropy principles in the Tower Foundation’s relationships with grantees, and with trust-based relationships inside CET between Community Experts, support partners, and staff. Internally, the CET Learning Framework names Trust-Based Relationships as one of the core guiding elements for how the team works together.

Evaluation Approach and Methods

The evaluation used qualitative, quantitative, and participatory methods, including:

- 25 in-depth interviews with current and alumni CET members, family/support partners, referral partners, Tower Foundation staff, and trustees.
- Session and retreat observations of CET virtual meetings, grantmaking sessions, and the October 2025 Buffalo retreat.
- Surveys and session evaluations capturing perceptions of participation, empowerment, accessibility, and overall experience.
- Document and artifact review, including the Community Experts Fund RFP, application materials, meeting agendas, communications, CET retreat materials, sample group agreements, and the Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report (May 2025).
- Participatory sense-making, including the CET Possibility Lab at the Buffalo retreat, where CET members engaged with findings via posters on Participation & Voice, Empowerment & Leadership, Equity & Accessibility, and Process & Supports, and contributed new insights and possibilities.

A concurrent approach meant that early insights could inform mid-course refinements (for example, adjustments to facilitation; practice applications and “what-if” review examples used to help the team get comfortable with different ways of assessing applications; or sharpening support for CET members). The evaluation thus functioned as both a mirror—reflecting how participants experienced CET in 2025—and an X-ray—surfacing deeper dynamics in power, equity, and leadership development. To protect confidentiality, this report uses role-based labels (e.g., “current CET member,” “support partner,” “Foundation staff member,” “trustee”) and does not name individuals or organizations.

Key Evaluation Questions

Grounded in the Tower Foundation’s learning priorities, the evaluation explored six focus areas:

- 1. Participation**—How participatory is CET? Are Community Experts actively shaping grantmaking decisions and the design of the Community Experts Fund?
- 2. Empowerment**—Do CET participants feel heard, valued, and empowered? How does CET nurture confidence, agency, and voice?
- 3. Advancing Equity**—How well does CET operationalize the Tower Foundation’s equity goals? Are young adult community members with lived experience connected to the Foundation’s focus areas and other historically marginalized voices meaningfully supported?
- 4. Improving Processes**—How effective are facilitation practices, communications, and supports? Where can inclusion and responsiveness be strengthened?
- 5. Participant Outcomes**—What personal, leadership, and professional benefits do participants report? How do experiences differ across identities and roles?
- 6. Benchmarking**—How does CET compare to other participatory grantmaking efforts nationally? What field-wide lessons can inform CET’s evolution?

What We Heard

Across data sources, several high-level findings emerged:

- **CET is a genuinely participatory grantmaking structure.** Community Experts are not advisory “extras”; they hold real decision-making power over the Community Experts Fund. CET members consistently described their influence on funding priorities, application criteria, and final grant decisions.
- **Participation nurtures confidence, agency, and possibility.** Many CET members reported increased confidence in speaking up, advocating for their communities, and engaging in systems-level conversations. They described CET as a place where lived experience is recognized as expertise and where they practice leadership in ways that feel authentic to them—even when they do not always identify with the word “leader.”
- **Equity and accessibility are core strengths—and ongoing work.** Stipends, tech support, neurodiversity accommodations, and thoughtful facilitation practices make CET more accessible than many spaces participants encounter. At the same time, some members continued to face challenges related to pace, language, and technology, and emphasized the importance of ongoing attention to diverse needs and clear routes for requesting additional accommodations.
- **Processes are strengthening, but expectations for partners and roles need more clarity.** CET members generally appreciated the openness and flexibility of facilitators and the scaffolding for grant review. However, some support partners and review partners were unsure when to step back or how best to support young adult voice, and some CET members were unsure how information about decisions, criteria, and grant history would be shared.
- **CET contributes to meaningful participant outcomes.** Participants described new networks, increased self-advocacy, a stronger sense of belonging, and emerging opportunities beyond CET (including roles such as Community Grant Consultants and other advisory or staff positions). They also expressed a desire for more explicit, voluntary pathways to stay involved after their term.
- **CET reflects and advances Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ (YPP) in practice.** A benchmarking review and field scan indicate that CET is distinctive in its focus on neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences; its integration with a named Community Experts Fund; and its alignment with YPP—treating young people and lived-experience leaders as architects of systems change rather than one-time advisors (see Appendix C for the full benchmarking report).

Implications and Recommendations

The report's Implications & Recommendations are organized into three domains:

1. Nurturing Possibility for Community Experts (CET Design & Facilitation)

- Make a range of leadership and contribution pathways more visible (e.g., co-facilitation, agenda co-creation, issue spotlights, alumni roles), while emphasizing that all forms of participation—not only traditional “leadership” roles—are valued.
- Continue to strengthen orientation and expectations for CET members, support partners, and review partners—especially around when partners should step back so team members can lead and how to reinforce accessibility and belonging.
- Provide curated stories of past Community Experts Fund grants so members can situate their decisions in a longer legacy of possibility.
- Make feedback loops more visible through brief “you said / we did” updates after major shifts or decisions.
- Continue to protect against extractive storytelling by making lived-experience sharing optional, supported, and clearly bounded.

2. Nurturing Possibility within the Tower Foundation (Strategy & Practice)

- Use the CET Learning and Outcomes Frameworks as touchstones for internal planning, staff reflection, and board learning.
- Continue to use and refine pathways like Community Grant Consultants (CGCs) for CET alumni who want to deepen their involvement in the Foundation's broader grantmaking.
- Explore structured opportunities for CET members and alumni to interact with trustees (e.g., learning sessions, advisory input on strategy) while preserving CET's autonomous decision-making authority for the Community Experts Fund.
- Continue to integrate concurrent evaluation and Emergent Learning practices across other portfolios, not just CET.

3. Nurturing Possibility in the Field (External Learning & Influence)

- Build on the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) *Perspectives* piece co-authored with the learning partner, CET and Tower Foundation staff to share further learning with the field.
- Position CET as a concrete example of Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ in practice by sharing tools (e.g., an autism-informed messaging and meeting reflections memo developed during the evaluation as an internal staff learning resource, group agreements, Possibility Lab materials) as adaptable resources for peers.
- Consider a multi-year field-building strategy in which CET insights inform sector-level conversations about equity, disability justice, and youth participatory grantmaking.

Looking Ahead

This report concludes that CET is already embodying many dimensions of the Tower family's founding vision—honoring dignity, elevating lived expertise, and sharing power through grantmaking. At the same time, the work of nurturing possibility is ongoing.

Each CET cohort now has the opportunity to build on the last, deepening participation pathways, sharpening equitable practices, and expanding the Foundation's influence on the broader field of philanthropy. The recommendations in this report are intended as both affirmation and a road map: a way to keep moving toward a future where communities are not merely consulted but centered, not only included but leading—and where possibility is nurtured at every level.

1. Framing the Vision: Founders, CET, and the Promise of Possibility

1.1 The Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation: A Legacy of Dignity and Possibility

The Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation’s history begins with the lives and experiences of its founders and their family. Peter and Elizabeth Tower believed that individuals facing challenges—particularly those navigating intellectual disabilities, learning differences, mental health needs, or substance use disorders—deserve compassion, respect, and meaningful opportunities to realize their potential.

Today, the Foundation’s work is guided by a clear mission, vision, and set of core values:

- **Mission.** As a grantmaker, partner, and advocate, the Tower Foundation strengthens organizations and works to change systems to improve the lives of young people with learning disabilities, mental illness, substance use disorders, and intellectual disabilities.
- **Vision.** The Tower Foundation envisions equitable communities where all young people are included, accepted, and valued; and are confident in themselves.
- **Values.** The Foundation values Diverse Voices, Collaboration, Innovation, Perseverance, and Equity.

Within this broader context, the Community Experts Team (CET) can be understood as a contemporary expression of the Foundation’s commitments. CET is grounded in a set of guiding principles that shape how the team works together—qualities like **compassion, humility, trust, partnership, inclusion, and learning**. These are not an official restatement of the Foundation’s core values, but they reflect the ethos that Community Experts, staff, and partners described in interviews and observations.

1.2 The Community Experts Team and Community Experts Fund

The **Community Experts Team** is a cohort of young adult community leaders with lived experience connected to the Tower Foundation’s focus areas. In recent years, the team has evolved from a smaller advisory group into a core grantmaking structure with real authority over the Community Experts Fund.

In 2025:

- Approximately **15 Community Experts** served on the CET.
- CET members co-designed the Community Experts Fund RFP, refining priorities and eligibility criteria.
- CET members reviewed applications, discussed strengths and challenges, and made final grant decisions for approximately **\$350,000** in funding.
- Tower Foundation staff and partners provided facilitation, logistical support, and capacity-building, while honoring CET’s decision-making authority for the Community Experts Fund.

Beginning in 2023, the Foundation also created a Community Grant Consultant (CGC) role as part of its Programs & Services grantmaking. Community Grant Consultants are community members with lived experience who review grant proposals and participate in deliberations and clarification calls alongside Program Officers. They receive a stipend for their participation and function as extensions of the Foundation's staff. To date, several CGCs have been CET alumni. This model creates a tangible pathway for Community Experts who want to deepen their involvement in the Tower Foundation's broader grantmaking beyond the Community Experts Fund.

This structure means that CET is not on the margins of grantmaking; it is woven into the heart of how a portion of Tower Foundation resources flow into communities.

1.3 CET in the Broader Context of Participatory Grantmaking

Within the broader field of philanthropy, participatory grantmaking is a growing practice in which those most affected by an issue help shape or make funding decisions. The Tower Foundation's CET model is distinctive in several ways:

- It centers youth and young adults with lived experience connected to the Foundation's focus areas as professionals. In CET's case, this includes neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences.
- It is integrated with a **named fund** (the Community Experts Fund) with real decision-making authority over a significant annual allocation.
- It is aligned with **Youth-Possible Philanthropy™**, a framework that invites philanthropy to nurture youth leadership and systemic influence over time, rather than engaging young people as one-time advisors.

The Tower Foundation's co-authored **Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Perspectives** piece, "Power Shared, Possibility Realized: YouthPossible Philanthropy™ in Practice at the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation," has already begun to share this story with peers. This evaluation builds on that narrative by providing deeper detail on CET's impact, lessons, and future possibilities.



CET featured in a **Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Perspectives** blog, "Power Shared, Possibility Realized," co-authored by Nissa Bisguier, Dr. Kimberlin Butler, and Megan MacDavey.

1.4 Framing Question and Key Evaluation Questions

This evaluation is anchored by one framing question:

What will it take to ensure that the Community Experts Team (CET) program advances equity and participation in ways that meaningfully reflect, respond to, and are shaped by the lived experiences of its participants?

To explore this question, the evaluation focused on six key areas:

Table 1. Key Evaluation Questions by Focus Area

Focus Area	Key Questions
Participation	How participatory is the CET initiative? Are Community Experts Team members actively influencing grantmaking decisions? Are their lived experiences clearly reflected in the design and outcomes?
Empowerment	Do CET participants feel heard, valued, and empowered through the process? How does the program nurture leadership and confidence?
Advancing Equity	How well does CET implement the Foundation's equity goals? Are young adult community members with lived experience connected to the Foundation's focus areas and historically marginalized voices meaningfully supported?
Improving Processes	How effective are facilitation practices, communications, and participant supports? Where are opportunities to strengthen inclusion and responsiveness?
Participant Outcomes	What personal, leadership, and professional benefits do participants report? How do experiences differ based on background, ability, or other characteristics?
Benchmarking	How does CET compare to other participatory grantmaking efforts nationally? What best practices and field-wide lessons could be adapted to strengthen the model?

These questions ensured that learning was comprehensive—focused not only on activities and outputs, but on systemic transformation, leadership development, equity, and field-level influence.

 *Being on CET helped me see myself as a leader, not just someone with a disability.”*

– Current CET member



CET members discuss grant applications at the Buffalo retreat.

CET members gather for the Essex County regional meet-up in Beverly, MA.



2. Evaluation Frameworks: Learning, Equity, and Shared Power in Philanthropy

2.1 Youth-Possible Philanthropy™

Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ (YPP), developed by Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler (2023), is a field-building framework that treats youth and lived-experience leaders not as beneficiaries, but as architects of systems change. It builds on and extends participatory grantmaking and Trust-Based Philanthropy by weaving together six reinforcing elements:

- **Youth Participatory Grantmaking**—Youth and lived-experience leaders share real decision-making power in philanthropy. They help shape strategy, co-design RFPs and guidelines, review applications, and make or directly influence funding decisions.
- **Trust-Based Philanthropy**—Funders build relationships grounded in transparency, mutual accountability, and responsiveness. Trust is demonstrated through clear communication, feedback loops (“you said/ we did”), and a posture of listening to community expertise about what is needed.
- **Equity-Centered Approach**—Structural inequities are named and addressed directly. YPP prioritizes historically marginalized youth and young adults, embedding accessibility, accommodations, and cultural responsiveness across design, facilitation, governance, and decision-making.
- **Multi-Sector Collaboration**—Youth, families, community organizations, schools, service providers, and philanthropy work together as an ecosystem. Cross-sector partners recruit and support participants, align resources, and sustain change beyond a single grant cycle.
- **Participatory Learning (Participatory Action Research)**—Data and learning are co-created with participants. Youth and community experts help interpret findings, identify patterns, and shape next steps through tools such as data walks, Possibility Labs, and ongoing reflection.
- **Possibility Development**—Philanthropy is understood as a catalyst for leadership growth, social capital, and self-actualization. Young people and community experts build confidence, networks, and influence that extend beyond any one program or grantmaking role.

In this evaluation, YPP serves as a **guiding lens**: it asks whether and how philanthropic practice can nurture possibility by sharing power with youth and lived-experience leaders. The Community Experts Team (CET) is one of the primary ways the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation is beginning to bring YPP to life in practice. Section 5 includes a detailed table illustrating how CET demonstrates key YPP elements and how this work is being shared with the broader field through the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) *Perspectives* article, “*Power Shared, Possibility Realized: Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ in Practice at the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation.*”

2.2 Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation

The evaluation is grounded in **Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CRE Evaluation)** principles:

- **Centering marginalized voices**—especially young adult community members with lived experience connected to the Foundation’s focus areas and other historically excluded communities;
- **Attending to context**—acknowledging disability, race, class, geography, and other factors shaping experience;
- **Designing for access**—using plain language, multiple formats, and flexible scheduling;
- **Challenging deficit narratives**—using asset-based framing (e.g., “youth experiencing poverty” rather than “low-income youth”).

These principles shaped the evaluation questions, protocols, and how findings are interpreted. They also guided recommendations about storytelling and the use of lived experience in CET spaces, emphasizing care and non-extraction.

2.3 Developmental Evaluation and Emergent Learning

Because CET is still evolving, the evaluation used a **Developmental Evaluation** (Patton, 2010) approach, emphasizing:

- **Real-time feedback** to support iterative improvements;
- **Adaptation** as CET refined existing practices (for example, using practice applications and bias-reflection guidance before live review, offering office hours and check-ins for additional support, and adjusting retreat structures based on team feedback);
- **Learning alongside** participants rather than only looking back at the end.

The evaluation also incorporated **Emergent Learning** (Darling, et al., 2016) practices, such as:

- Treating unexpected challenges (e.g., tech barriers, schedule shifts) as opportunities to learn and adjust;
- Using memos after key sessions to capture what happened, what was learned, and what to try next;
- Co-interpretation through the **CET Possibility Lab** at the retreat, where participants engaged directly with emerging data and helped shape meaning.

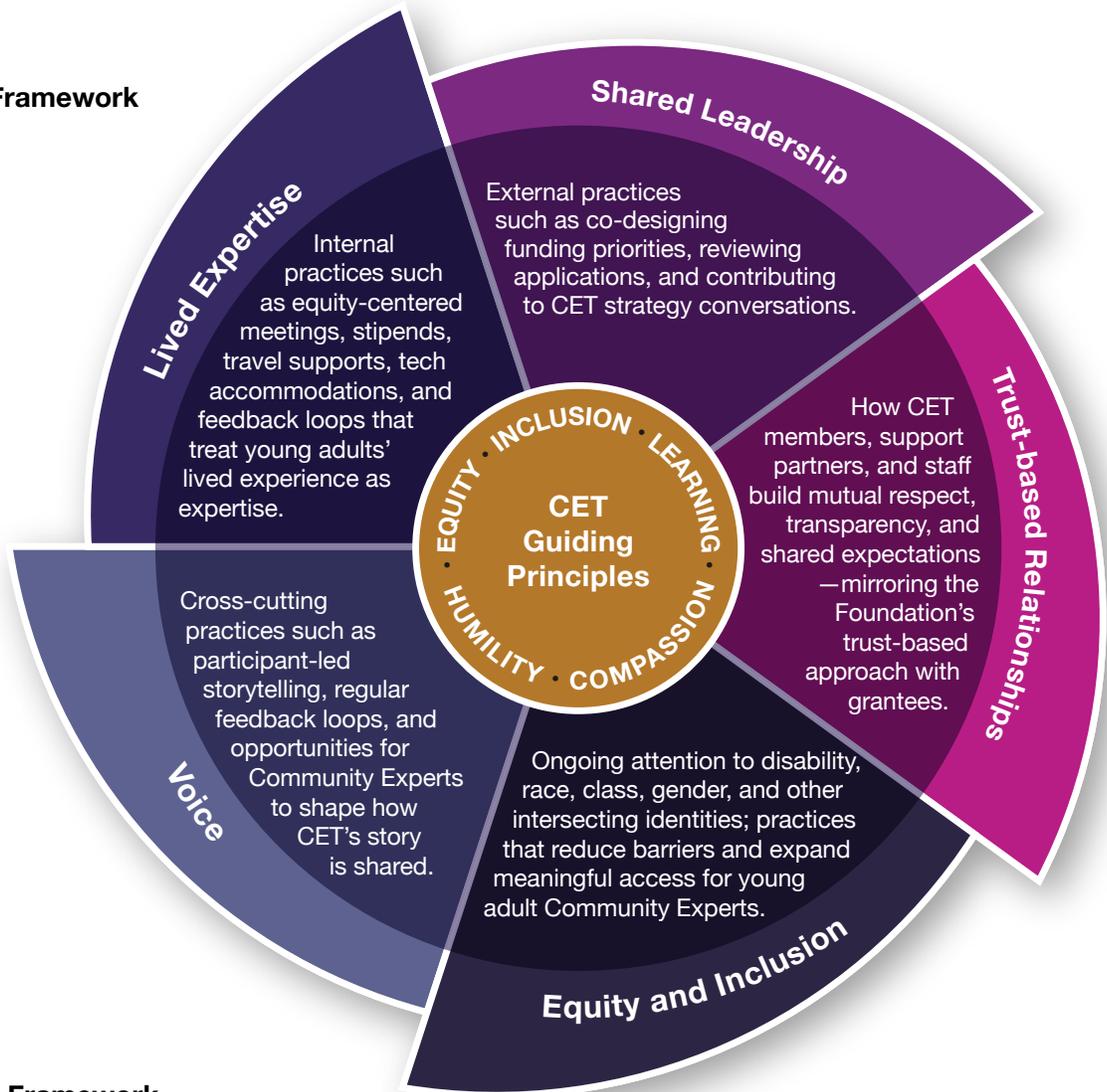
“*Before CET I never pictured myself on anything like a committee. Now I can imagine being on a board or advisory group one day.*”

– CET alumnus

2.4 CET Learning and Outcomes Framework

Two visual frameworks help organize CET’s work:

1. CET Learning Framework



2. CET Outcomes Framework



Throughout this report, these frameworks are used to interpret findings and shape recommendations—for CET members, the Tower Foundation, and the broader field.



CET members share their opinions in a discussion circle at the Buffalo retreat.

A little down time for CET members at the Buffalo retreat.



3. Evaluation Approach, Methods, and Data Sources

3.1 Mixed-Methods, Concurrent, and Participatory Approach

The CET evaluation was designed as:

- **Mixed-methods**—integrating qualitative, quantitative, and document-based data to show both patterns and lived experience;
- **Concurrent**—gathering and analyzing data throughout the 2025 program cycle to inform real-time learning;
- **Participatory**—inviting CET members and partners into meaning-making, positioning them as co-interpreters and co-designers of the learning rather than as passive data sources.

Rather than operating in separate phases, data collection and sense-making were woven throughout the year. For example, early survey insights shaped follow-up interview questions, and observation notes informed prompts for the Possibility Lab at the retreat.

3.2 Key Evaluation Questions and Learning Questions

In addition to the six key focus areas, the evaluation was guided by four overarching **Learning Questions (LQs)** that map to the CET Learning Framework:

Table 2. Learning Questions and Framework Connections

Learning Question (LQ)	Learning Framework Area	How this helps the Tower Foundation learn
1. How participatory is the CET initiative?	Shared Leadership & Trust-Based Relationships	Assesses whether CET members are actively influencing decision-making; helps strengthen structures that authentically share power with community experts.
2. Do CET participants feel heard, valued, and empowered?	Voice, Lived Expertise, Equity & Inclusion	Examines whether participants experience dignity, leadership development, and meaningful engagement; informs practices that build confidence and ownership.
3. How well does the CET program implement the Foundation’s equity goals?	Equity & Inclusion	Evaluates how CET structures support young adult community members with lived experience connected to the Foundation’s focus areas and historically marginalized voices; guides improvements to access, accommodations, and culturally responsive practice.
4. How does CET compare to national participatory grantmaking models?	Learning & Shared Leadership	Identifies best practices and field-wide lessons; helps refine CET based on emerging trends and effective strategies in the broader sector.

To answer these questions, the evaluation drew on multiple data sources.

3.3 Data Sources and Collection Strategies

3.3.1 Qualitative Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

- 25 interviews with:
 - Current CET members (young adults)
 - Alumni CET members
 - Family/support partners
 - Referral partners
 - Grant partners
 - Tower Foundation staff
 - Trustees
- Protocols were equity-centered, with flexibility for participants to skip questions or focus on what mattered most to them.

Observations

- Structured observations of:
 - CET virtual meetings (including grant review and decision-making sessions);
 - The October 2025 Buffalo retreat, including the Possibility Lab;
 - Community Experts Fund-related sessions.
- Observers documented facilitation practices, engagement patterns, accessibility supports, youth-adult dynamics, and evidence of shared leadership.

Document and Artifact Review

- Community Experts Fund RFPs and application materials;
- Meeting agendas, slides, and communications;
- CET retreat prep materials and the Possibility Lab posters on Participation & Voice, Empowerment & Leadership, Equity & Accessibility, and Process & Supports;
- The CET autism-informed messaging and meeting reflections memo and sample group agreements for youth-participatory spaces;
- The CET Learning Framework and Outcomes Framework visuals;
- The Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report (May 2025);
- Relevant Tower Foundation historical materials and the GEO *Perspectives* article.

The autism-informed messaging and meeting reflections memo was created by the evaluator during this project to support affirming language and accessible meeting design; it is not a standing CET design document and was not used as a participant-facing tool.

3.3.2 Quantitative Methods

Surveys and Session Evaluations

- Online surveys and post-session evaluations captured:
 - Perceptions of influence and power-sharing;
 - Feelings of being heard, valued, and respected;
 - Experiences of accessibility and inclusion;
 - Satisfaction with facilitation and communication.

Engagement and Participation Patterns

- Attendance and participation over the program cycle were reviewed to identify:
 - Patterns in engagement across sessions;
 - Any notable points of drop-off;
 - Differences between virtual and in-person participation.

3.3.3 Participatory Methods

Data Walk and Possibility Lab

- At the Buffalo retreat, preliminary findings were presented visually through a Possibility Lab featuring four large posters:
 - Participation & Voice;
 - Empowerment & Leadership;
 - Equity & Accessibility;
 - Process & Supports.
- Each poster included:
 - A mini “data box” summarizing key survey and interview themes;
 - Short quotes from CET members;
 - A **Reaction Zone** prompting participants to add sticky notes with:
 - One thing that worked well;
 - One thing to improve;
 - A question or what’s missing;
 - A new possibility for CET in the future.
- Notes were grouped into themes and fed back into this report’s findings and recommendations.

Co-Interpretation Conversations

- Informal and structured conversations with staff and CET members after the retreat helped refine interpretations, clarify nuances, and prioritize recommendations.

3.3.4 Data Source Alignment

To strengthen validity, multiple sources were used to address each Learning Question:

Table 3. Learning Questions and Aligned Data Sources

Learning Question (LQ)	Document Review	Interviews	Observations	Surveys
1. How participatory is the CET initiative?	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Do CET participants feel heard, valued, and empowered?	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. How well does the CET program implement the Foundation’s equity goals?	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. How does CET compare to national participatory grantmaking models?	✓	✓	—	—

3.4 Anonymity, Role Labels, and How to Read This Report

To protect confidentiality:

- This report does **not** name individual participants or organizations.
- Quotes are attributed using **role-based** labels, such as:
 - “current CET member”;
 - “past CET member”;
 - “support partner”;
 - “referral partner”;
 - “Foundation staff member”;
 - “trustee.”
- In a few cases, details are lightly generalized to prevent identification while preserving meaning.

How to Read This Report

- When you see quotes, they come from interviews, surveys, or Possibility Lab reflections.
- To protect confidentiality, we use role labels instead of names (for example, “current CET member,” “support partner,” “Foundation staff member,” “trustee”).
- Quotes are shared with permission and may be adjusted only to remove identifying details. The intent and tone remain true to what participants shared.
- When we say “participants,” we mean everyone who contributed to CET in 2025 or prior years—CET members, alumni, support partners, referral partners, staff, and trustees.

3.5 Limitations and How to Interpret the Findings

Several limitations are important to hold in mind:

- **Single-cycle snapshot with limited retrospective look-back.** Findings are based primarily on the 2025 Community Experts Team cycle and the associated Community Experts Fund process, with selective reference to 2024 materials and experiences to provide context. CET continues to evolve, and some recommendations may already be in motion by the time this report is read.
- **Role distribution.** While multiple stakeholder groups are represented, the number of participants in each group is modest. Themes reflect patterns across sources rather than statistically representative samples.
- **Self-report data.** Interviews and surveys rely on participants' own recollections and reflections. These are essential for understanding experience, but they do not capture every dynamic.
- **Concurrent evaluation.** Because the evaluation ran alongside the program, some mid-course adjustments were made based on emerging insights. This is a strength for learning, but it means the evaluation both documented and influenced CET's evolution.

Taken together, these limitations mean the evaluation should be read as:

- A **mirror** that reflects how participants experienced the 2025 CET process; and
- An **X-ray** that offers a deeper look at patterns in power-sharing, equity, and leadership development.

It is not the final word on CET's long-term impact. Instead, it provides a strong foundation for continued inquiry and improvement—and for future cohorts to build upon.

Discussion circle at the Buffalo retreat.



4. What We Heard: Participation, Leadership, Equity, and Experience

Across interviews, Community Experts, alumni, staff, partners, and trustees described three things as the heart of CET's purpose:

- being part of a real decision-making body that shapes grants through the Community Experts Fund;
- forming relationships and friendships with other young adult community members and staff; and
- having their lived experience directly influence which ideas and organizations receive funding.

To honor the range of perspectives shared, this section intentionally weaves in anonymized quotes from Community Experts, alumni, staff, and trustees. These quotes are illustrative rather than exhaustive; they are used to give texture to the patterns we saw across coded interviews, surveys, observation notes, and document review.

The findings in this section are anchored in that core purpose. Leadership development shows up as an important outcome and future opportunity that emerges for some Community Experts through their involvement, but it is not treated as the primary “goal” of CET.

This section synthesizes what we heard across interviews, surveys, observations, and the Possibility Lab. It is organized by theme rather than by data source, with each subsection reflecting multiple voices and perspectives.

4.1 Participation & Power-Sharing

4.1.1 CET members experience real decision-making power.

Many CET members described the grantmaking role as both exciting and serious. They understood that their recommendations determined which organizations received Community Experts Fund grants—and that this authority was grounded in their lived experience.

- *“We weren’t just voting on what staff already picked. We actually decided where the money went.”* – current CET member
- *“It wasn’t pretend power. We had real conversations, disagreed sometimes, and then our decision was the final one.”* – current CET member

Observation of grant decision meetings confirmed that CET members led discussions, deliberated differences, and reached consensus, with staff serving primarily as facilitators and clarifiers.

4.1.2 Co-design of the RFP made priorities feel authentic.

CET members noted that being consulted on the RFP language, examples, and criteria helped ensure that the Community Experts Fund would reach organizations working in ways that mattered to them.

- *“We got to say what issues we see and what we think should be funded. That changed how I think about power.”* – current CET member
- *“When I saw our words in the RFP, it made me feel like, okay, they actually listened and trusted what we said.”* – current CET member

4.1.3 Some members still wondered how decisions connect to the larger picture.

While CET has autonomous decision-making authority for Community Experts Fund awards, several members expressed curiosity about how their work fit into the Foundation’s larger strategy and history.

- *“We choose the grantees, but I don’t always know what happens next. It would be cool to see how our decisions fit into the bigger story.”* – current CET member
- *“I’d love a simple story that shows where the money went and what changed because of us.”* – current CET member

This theme points to an opportunity: making historic and current Community Experts Fund grant patterns more visible to CET and showing how their decisions contribute to the Foundation’s legacy.

4.2 Empowerment & Leadership Development

Across the data, leadership shows up as one of several outcomes of CET participation—alongside connection, confidence, systems awareness, and a stronger sense of belonging. In this report, leadership is framed as something that can naturally emerge for some Community Experts through the work of making grant decisions together, rather than as a central requirement or gatekeeper for participation.

CET was not designed primarily as a leadership program; its core purpose is to center young adults with lived experience in grant decision-making and to build connection and belonging. At the same time, many participants described powerful shifts in confidence and agency that look and feel like leadership growth.

4.2.1 CET builds confidence in speaking and leading.

Many youth and young adult CET members described arriving with some hesitation and leaving with increased confidence.

- *“At first I was nervous talking on Zoom. Now I speak up more at school and at work because of CET.”* – current CET member
- *“Being on CET helped me see myself as a leader, not just someone with a disability.”* – CET member
- *“Now I raise my hand more in other meetings too, not just CET. It reminded me that my opinion actually matters.”* – CET member

Participants linked this growth to concrete practices: being asked their opinion, having time to prepare before meetings, rotating who shares out from small groups, and seeing staff take their input seriously.

Mini-case: From CET member to community leader

One CET alum described joining the team while navigating both school and disability-related barriers. Through CET, they built confidence speaking in groups, learned how grant decisions are made, and practiced giving feedback to organizations. After their term ended, the alum was invited to serve on a youth advisory council for a local nonprofit and later hired in a part-time staff role focused on peer engagement. In reflecting on this trajectory, they shared that CET “was the first space where my lived experience was treated as expertise — that made it easier to say yes when other leadership opportunities showed up.”

4.2.2 Leadership pathways are emerging but could be more explicit.

Over the year, CET members and alumni were invited into a range of visible roles – facilitating check-ins, helping co-design meeting activities, speaking in front of trustees, and, in some cases, moving into roles such as Community Grant Consultant (CGC) or other contractual paid advisory positions.

Participants appreciated these opportunities but noted that many of them were learned about informally rather than through a clear menu or pathway.

- *“Sometimes it felt like opportunities popped up for certain people, but I wasn’t always sure how to put my name in the hat.”* – CET alumnus

One alumnus reflected on wanting more visible opportunities to share CET’s story, saying they had heard about other members presenting with staff and wanted to know “what those pathways are and how to get involved.” In follow-up conversations, staff understood this comment as likely referencing opportunities within partner organizations, not the Foundation itself. The underlying desire—for clearer, more transparent opportunities to represent CET and share lived experience publicly—came through in multiple interviews.

This points to an opportunity to more clearly name what is possible during and after CET (for example, facilitating small activities, co-presenting with partner organizations, serving as a CGC, or taking on other paid advisory roles), while still keeping participation voluntary and flexible.

4.2.3 Support partners appreciate the model but want clearer guidance on their role.

Support partners (family, mentors, staff from partner organizations) expressed pride in seeing youth in leadership roles but sometimes felt unsure about when to speak and when to step back.

- *“I want to be helpful, but I don’t want to overshadow them. Sometimes I’m not sure if I’m talking too much.”* – support partner

A few CET members shared that in some breakout rooms, a support partner did most of the talking, which made it harder for team members to share their own ideas. This dynamic shows up in both observation notes and retreat feedback.

4.3 Equity & Accessibility

4.3.1 Stipends, accommodations, and flexibility are core strengths.

Participants consistently highlighted stipends, tech support, and flexible meeting structures as critical to their participation.

- *“The stipend meant I didn’t have to choose between this and my job. It made it possible.”*
– current CET member
- *“They really tried to meet us where we’re at—reminders, closed captions, options if your internet wasn’t great.”* – current CET member
- *“It felt good that they assumed people might need support instead of making us ask over and over.”*
– current CET member
- A trustee echoed this, emphasizing that equity and inclusion in CET *“aren’t just buzzwords that look good on paper—you actually see the equitable work being put forth in real time.”* – trustee

4.3.2 CET feels welcoming and inclusive, but barriers remain.

Survey and Possibility Lab feedback indicate that most participants experienced CET as welcoming. At the same time, some noted that:

- the pace and amount of information could feel overwhelming;
- tech challenges—like low internet strength or needing to join by phone—sometimes made it harder to fully participate;
- it was sometimes unclear how to request additional accommodations or supports.
- *“Zoom was hard sometimes—tech support helped, but it wasn’t always enough.”* – current CET member

Tech challenges showed up in practical ways: unstable internet connections that caused Zoom to freeze, audio dropping during small-group discussions, or needing to log in by phone when a laptop or camera wasn’t available. In a few cases, young adults and support partners spent extra time troubleshooting log-ins or screen-sharing, which could be stressful and cut into discussion time. Staff and support partners responded by building in tech checks, sharing slides in advance, and normalizing that people could participate with camera off or by phone when needed.

4.3.3 Participants value non-extractive approaches to lived experience.

A strong theme, especially from staff and trustees, was a desire to honor lived experience without requiring participants to repeatedly share personal or traumatic stories.

- *“I don’t want them to feel like they have to ‘perform’ their trauma for us. Their expertise isn’t just their hardest moments.”* – Foundation staff member
- *“They never pushed us to tell every detail. I could share what I wanted and still be taken seriously.”* – current CET member

Several CET members echoed this, appreciating that they could choose when and how to connect their experiences to discussions.

4.3.4 Recruitment pathways can unintentionally narrow who participates.

While CET’s design centers young adults with lived experience connected to the Foundation’s focus areas, several interviewees raised questions about who is *able* to access the opportunity. Because most Community Experts are currently recruited through partner organizations, some referral partners worried that they might default to recommending the young person who already appears “ready” rather than those who could benefit most from the experience.

- *“If we’re not careful, we’ll send the young person who is already shining. I sometimes worry we’re missing the ones who would really grow from something like this.”* – referral partner

Others noted that youth and young adults who are less connected to services, more marginalized, or experiencing higher levels of instability may be least likely to be nominated—even though they have critical insight into the Foundation’s focus areas.

This does not reflect a lack of commitment on the part of referral partners; rather, it highlights how network-based recruitment can unintentionally privilege young adults who are already seen as “leaders.” It points to an opportunity to:

- provide clearer, more inclusive guidance for referral partners about who CET is for (emphasizing potential and lived experience, not polish); and
- explore complementary outreach routes beyond existing partners so that young adults who are more marginalized, or not yet connected to services, also have pathways into CET.

4.4 Processes, Communication, and Supports

4.4.1 Facilitators are seen as open, flexible, and caring.

CET members frequently named facilitation as a strength.

- “They really listen and adjust. It’s not just ‘here’s the plan, deal with it.’” – current CET member
- “The local meet-ups helped me feel more comfortable before the big retreat.” – current CET member

4.4.2 Grant review tools and scenarios are helpful, but complex.

The grant scenarios (e.g., rubric scoring, ranking) and conflict-of-interest guidelines helped CET members navigate decision-making. However, some participants found the volume of information and steps challenging, especially earlier in the process.

- “Once I understood the rubric, it made sense. It just took a while to get there.” – current CET member
- “The practice examples helped a lot. Seeing a fake application first made it easier to know what to look for in the real ones.” – current CET member

4.4.3 Communication and feedback loops could be more consistent and visible.

Participants appreciated periodic emails and Slack updates but sometimes wished for clearer summaries of “what’s happening when” and “what changed because of our input.”

- “We said a lot of things during the year. Sometimes I wasn’t sure what actually changed because of it.” – current CET member
- “When they circled back and said ‘you said this, so we changed that,’ it made me want to keep speaking up.” – current CET member

This theme surfaced strongly in the Possibility Lab’s “Process & Supports” poster.

**WELCOME TO THE
COMMUNITY EXPERTS
TEAM POSSIBILITY LAB**

PETER & ELIZABETH
TOWER FOUNDATION

The L.E.A.D.
Agency

1 Framing Question
What will it take to make sure CET truly reflects **your** voices, leadership, and lived experiences?

2 Why We're Here
Here, your voices meet the data. Walk through, read what others have said, and add your own possibilities. There are no wrong answers – every note matters.

3 How It Works
During lunch, stop by the CET Possibility Lab upstairs.
• Read quotes and findings.
• React with sticky notes.
• Share your perspective.

4 What You Will Do
• Ask questions
• Write what feels true
• Suggest new possibilities
• Co-design the report
• Impact the future of CET

At the bottom of each poster, you'll see a **Reaction Zone**. This is your space to add sticky notes. Share:

- ☺ One thing that worked really well
- ☹ One thing we should improve
- ? A question or what's missing
- ! A new possibility for CET in the future

Notes will be collected and grouped into themes. We'll share these back with the team.

The CET Possibility Lab invited members to co-interpret evaluation findings and advance participatory learning in action.

4.5 Participant Outcomes and Pathways

4.5.1 CET nurtures leadership, networks, and self-advocacy.

Many CET members described tangible outcomes:

- Increased comfort advocating for themselves in school, work, or service settings;
- New relationships with peers, mentors, and staff;
- Broader understanding of how systems operate and where they can exert influence.
- *“Now I know how foundations work—and I can see a place for myself in that world.”*
– current CET member
- *“Before CET I never pictured myself on anything like a committee. Now I can imagine being on a board or advisory group one day.”* – CET alumnus

One trustee summarized it this way: “We’re giving them agency and allowing them to grow and feel more useful, and to learn some business sense along the way. I think it’s wonderful.” – trustee

Trustees echoed these themes from their vantage point. In board interviews, they described CET as “one of the clearest expressions of our values in action” and emphasized how powerful it is to see young adult community members with lived experience leading grant decisions rather than only advising. Several trustees noted that hearing directly from Community Experts has reshaped how they think about whose experience counts as expertise in the Foundation’s work and has prompted deeper reflection on equity, disability, and mental health across portfolios.

Trustees also saw CET as a potential “pipeline of insight” into future advisory and governance conversations. They imagined a spectrum of voluntary pathways for interested alumni—staying connected as storytellers and ambassadors, serving in roles such as Community Grants Consultants, or, over time, participating in committees that help inform strategy. At the same time, they were clear that not every CET member needs or wants a formal leadership position. From their perspective, the core outcome is that Community Experts feel truly part of a decision-making body, with additional pathways available—but never required—for those who are energized by broader advocacy or governance roles.

4.5.2 Alumni trajectories illustrate possibility development.

Staff and trustees highlighted examples of CET alumni who have moved into:

- paid contractor roles with the Foundation (for example, Community Grant Consultants who review Programs & Services proposals alongside staff);
- paid staff positions or fellowships in community organizations; and
- advisory or leadership positions within community-based groups.

The Community Grant Consultant (CGC) model, launched in 2023, has already included several CET alumni and represents a concrete pathway for young adults with lived experience to participate more deeply in the Foundation’s core grantmaking processes.

These stories illustrate how CET can function as a launchpad for broader leadership influence when follow-on opportunities are visible and supported.

4.5.3 Foundation & Governance: How CET Is Shaping the Tower Foundation

From the perspective of trustees and senior staff, CET is not a standalone project; it is reshaping how the Foundation understands its work and what it means to share power.

One trustee noted that in ten to twenty years they hope the Foundation “*will be known for leading the way on participatory grantmaking and helping other foundations move in that direction.*”

Trustees described CET as:

- “One of the clearest expressions of our values in action,” because it directly transfers decision-making power to community members with lived experience; and
- “a model other foundations could learn from,” given the way it combines decision-making authority, stipends, and support for young adult community members who have often been excluded from these roles.

Several trustees talked about how listening in on CET conversations has affected their own thinking:

- One trustee shared that they “*learned more about our focus areas by listening to Community Experts debate the grants than in some of our own board discussions,*” noting that the team surfaced nuances about access, stigma, and belonging that do not always show up in traditional proposal reviews.
- Another reflected that CET “*reminds us who our grantmaking is actually for,*” and that hearing Community Experts’ questions and criteria has sharpened the kinds of questions trustees ask during board deliberations.

Mini-case: From CET member to local housing advocate

One CET member described how participating in the program helped them see themselves as a leader and advocate. After completing their first year on CET, they drew on skills from the grantmaking process—listening to different perspectives, weighing trade-offs, and standing firm in their values—to advocate for a local housing development in their community that would serve people with developmental disabilities.

They spoke at a public town hall before the local zoning board, countering “not in my backyard” attitudes and challenging language that reduced future residents to “inhabitants.” They connected their CET experience—making grant decisions in a group where people did not always agree—to navigating disagreement in their community while still pushing for inclusive solutions.

This member shared that when they were first diagnosed, they doubted whether they could make a difference in anyone’s life; through CET, they came to understand their value and their ability to contribute meaningfully to their community. This trajectory from program participant to local advocate exemplifies CET’s potential to nurture long-term possibility development and civic leadership beyond the grant cycle.

“*The local meet-ups helped me feel more comfortable before the big retreat.*”

– Current CET member

Trustees also see future-facing possibilities in CET. Ideas that surfaced in interviews included:

- creating structured advisory roles where Community Experts or alumni could offer input on strategy questions beyond the Community Experts Fund;
- being more intentional about inviting CET voices into broader learning conversations with the board (for example, grantee visits, learning sessions, or portfolio-level reflections); and
- exploring, over the long term and with careful attention to legal and structural considerations, whether CET alumni might one day be part of a pool of candidates for governance roles or standing advisory committees.

At the same time, trustees and staff emphasized the need to move at a pace that matches readiness and capacity, and to balance openness with their fiduciary responsibilities. Several trustees named the importance of:

- inviting CET perspectives into board-level learning in ways that are thoughtfully designed and aligned with CET’s culture of belonging; and
- ensuring that any advisory or governance-adjacent roles are well-supported, clearly scoped, and fully voluntary.

The Community Grant Consultant (CGC) initiative is one concrete bridge between CET and the broader grantmaking portfolio. Beginning in 2023, the Foundation invited a small group of community members with lived experience to join the Programs & Services grant review process as CGCs. CGCs review proposals and participate in deliberations and clarification calls alongside Program Officers and receive a stipend for their participation. To date, several of the CGCs have been CET alumni, with at least one additional CET alumnus selected who later had to withdraw due to scheduling constraints.

Trustees see the CGC model as a way to:

- bring CET’s lessons about lived experience and accessibility into the Foundation’s broader grantmaking;
- test what it looks like to work in sustained partnership with community members outside of CET; and
- create a pathway for interested CET alumni to deepen their influence without turning CET itself into a leadership-only program.

Takeaway: Trustees and staff see CET as a catalyst for culture change within the Foundation.

Structured, accessible pathways like CGCs and carefully designed advisory touchpoints provide ways to connect CET’s learning to governance and strategy conversations, while still protecting CET’s core purpose as a decision-making body and community of belonging for young adult community members with lived experience.

While trustees reflected on CET’s influence within the Foundation, the benchmarking analysis places CET in a broader context—showing how it compares to and contributes to the evolving field of participatory grantmaking.

“ *CET reminds us who our grantmaking is actually for.* ”
– Trustee

4.6 Benchmarking and Field-Level Insight

A 2025 benchmarking review and field scan of youth- and community-led funds found that the Community Experts Team (CET) occupies a distinctive and influential space in the growing participatory grantmaking field. While many peer models engage young people or community members as advisors or reviewers, far fewer grant full decision-making authority to a core team of young adults with lived experience—and even fewer explicitly center neurodiversity and disability inclusion as equity priorities.

What sets CET apart

Across the national examples reviewed, CET stands out in several ways:

- **Decision-making power.** In many youth advisory councils and community review panels, young people recommend grants while staff or boards make final decisions. In CET, Community Experts make final funding decisions for a dedicated fund. Their authority over the Community Experts Fund places them alongside staff and trustees as institutional decision-makers.
- **Integration of accessibility and equity.** CET’s design weaves together accessibility supports (stipends, tech assistance, pacing, plain-language materials, accommodations) with equity goals, rather than treating accessibility as a separate add-on. This mirrors emerging field guidance that meaningful youth and young adult participation requires structural support, not just invitations to the table.
- **Connection to a named fund.** Few programs in the scan name and resource a specific fund controlled by participants. The Community Experts Fund—autonomous yet nested within the Foundation’s broader strategy—offers a clear and replicable model for funders seeking to share power while maintaining accountability.
- **Commitment to participatory learning.** CET couples decision-making with structured reflection—data walks, Possibility Lab activities, and co-interpretation of findings. This combination of participatory grantmaking and participatory learning remains rare and positions CET as both a fund and a learning space.
- **Focus on neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences as a core decision-making body.** Most peer initiatives emphasize “youth voice” broadly. CET is one of the only participatory grantmaking programs in the scan that centers neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences as its core decision-making body.

“*I hope in ten to twenty years the Foundation will be known for leading the way on participatory grantmaking and helping other foundations move in that direction.*”

– Trustee

Key field comparisons

The benchmarking review drew insight from several model types:

- Community-led funds (for example, Partnership for Better Health) that engage community cohorts with lived experience in full-cycle design and grant decisions. These models affirm CET's emphasis on lived expertise and suggest opportunities to deepen alumni leadership and shared ownership over time.
- Youth-led grantmaking programs (such as Women's Foundation of Minnesota youth committees, Youth for Community Improvement, and youth advisory councils at community foundations) where young people design processes and lead decisions, often paired with public showcases or youth forums. These examples reinforce CET's strengths and point toward possibilities like youth learning forums or public storytelling about Community Experts' work.
- Lived-experience councils and expert panels (for example, JustFund's Lived Experience Council and other advisory bodies) that leverage community expertise to shape strategy and review proposals. CET goes a step further by combining this advisory role with direct decision-making and by offering pathways such as Community Grant Consultants (CGCs) for deeper involvement in the Foundation's core grantmaking.
- Flow-funding and intermediary models (such as Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Building Local Alignment and youth-led mini-grant models at community foundations) that illustrate how funders can work through local partners while maintaining participatory decision structures. These examples inform future possibilities for CET-informed re-granting or youth-led mini-grant strategies through intermediaries.

From these comparisons, CET emerges as one of the only participatory grantmaking programs designed specifically to center neurodivergent and young adults with lived experience as funders, not grantees—and to pair that role with explicit attention to accessibility, belonging, and shared learning.

Implications for CET and the field

Several peer practices from the benchmarking review directly shaped the implications and recommendations in Section 6:

- **Alumni engagement and advisory pathways.** Many youth philanthropy programs sustain leadership through alumni councils, networks, or advisory roles. This informed recommendations to formalize flexible alumni touchpoints for CET (e.g., ambassadors, peer mentors, advisory contributors) and to build on the existing CGC model as a concrete pathway beyond the Community Experts Fund.
- **Community consultant and co-governance models.** Comparative examples highlight the value of compensated community consultants and shared governance structures. These models undergird suggestions to further clarify and expand roles like CGCs and to explore carefully designed advisory touchpoints between CET alumni and Foundation committees or board learning spaces.
- **Field-facing learning and thought leadership.** Peer funds that regularly publish case studies, toolkits, and reflections help normalize lived experience as expertise. This scan reinforced the importance of the Tower Foundation's emerging field-building efforts—including the GEO *Perspectives* piece, future writing grounded in Youth-Possible Philanthropy™, and opportunities to position CET as a disability- and neurodiversity-informed participatory model.

Taken together, the benchmarking review and field scan suggest that CET contributes to a maturing field of practice by showing what it looks like when participatory grantmaking is designed around accessibility, disability equity, and the lived experience of young adult community members connected to the Foundation's focus areas. The model's emphasis on belonging, practical support, and real decision-making power makes it an important reference point for funders interested in deep equity—not only who participates, but how participation is supported.

The full **Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report—May 2025** is included as Attachment C for trustees and staff who wish to explore comparative models and field literature in more depth.

4.6.1 CET is aligned with emerging best practices in participatory grantmaking.

The Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report (May 2025) and broader literature review show that strong participatory grantmaking models:

- Provide real decision-making power to community members;
- Center equity and access;
- Invest in participant leadership development;
- Use iterative learning and feedback loops.

CET demonstrates all of these characteristics.

4.6.2 CET’s focus on neurodivergent young adults and other young adults with intellectual and learning disabilities, and with mental health and substance use experiences is distinctive.

Few peer models explicitly prioritize youth and young adults with intellectual or learning disabilities as a core decision-making body. CET therefore contributes important learning to both disability justice and participatory philanthropy fields.

4.6.3 CET participants are architects of systems change, not one-time advisors.

In many field examples, youth and community members are consulted through panels or periodic listening sessions. CET goes further by giving participants real control over a named fund, embedding their expertise in the Foundation’s everyday grantmaking practice.

The full *Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report—May 2025* is included as Attachment C for ease of reference.

Throughout this report, we hold **program intent and participant experience together**. The Foundation designed CET to center young adult lived experience in grant decisions, build connection and belonging, and move resources into communities in more equitable ways. At the same time, Community Experts, alumni, staff, trustees, and partners named how the model feels in practice—where it is working as intended, where it has evolved in response to feedback, and where there are still tensions or gaps. When those tensions appear (for example, around leadership expectations, role clarity, or accessibility), we treat them not as contradictions to resolve in favor of one perspective or another, but as learning opportunities that can guide the next iteration of CET’s design.

These patterns suggest that leadership development is a strong outcome and future opportunity for CET—not the core intent of the program. Recommendations about alumni pathways and public-facing roles are therefore offered as optional opportunities to nurture what is already happening organically, not as a rigid ladder that all Community Experts are expected to climb. Any future leadership roles will need to stay aligned with CET’s commitment to accessibility, accommodations, and honoring a wide range of meaningful ways to contribute.

“ *Once I understood the rubric, it made sense.
It just took a while to get there.*”

– Current CET member



CET members gather for regional meet-up in downtown Buffalo.

CET members gather for dinner at a regional meet up on Martha's Vineyard.



5. CET as an Expression of Youth-Possible Philanthropy™

5.1 Alignment with YPP Elements

The table below summarizes how CET reflects key elements of Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ as described in Dr. Butler’s work and illustrated in the *GEO Perspectives* piece.

Table 4. CET and Youth-Possible Philanthropy™

YPP Element	Definition	How CET Demonstrates It
Youth Participatory Grantmaking	Youth and lived-experience leaders have real decision-making power.	CET members co-design the Community Experts Fund RFP, review applications, and decide how to allocate approximately \$350,000 annually.
Trust-Based Philanthropy (within YPP)	Culture grounded in trust, transparency, learning, and mutual accountability.	The Tower Foundation shares power, invites community expertise, and builds reciprocal trust through open communication, stipends, accessibility supports, and transparency about grantmaking processes. Community Grant Consultants bring community voice into broader portfolio conversations.
Equity-Centered Approach	Centered on historically resilient and excluded youth; addressing systemic inequities is a core goal; equity and accessibility embedded throughout design.	Grounded in the Tower Foundation’s ethos of equity, humility, and accessibility, CET integrates accommodations, neurodiversity supports, stipends, and intentional inclusion of young adults with a history of mental health challenges and substance use disorders.
Multi-Sector Collaboration	Cross-sector ecosystem of support, engagement, and accountability.	Referral, support, and review partners connect schools, community-based organizations, disability service providers, and nonprofits—helping to sustain equity across systems and connect CET to broader networks.
Participatory Learning	Co-interpretation of data and shared reflection.	The Possibility Lab and follow-on discussions create spaces where youth, staff, and partners interpret learning together in real time, shaping recommendations and next steps.
Possibility Development	Philanthropy as a catalyst for leadership growth, social capital, and self-actualization.	CET members build skills, confidence, and networks; to date, alumni have moved into contractor and advisory roles (for example, Community Grant Consultants and community board members), with interest in exploring future pathways that could eventually include governance roles. Additionally, the Foundation commissioned a CET logo designed by a team member, investing directly in their creative skills and voice.

Together, these elements show that CET is not simply an advisory group; it is a youth-participatory, equity-centered grantmaking structure that treats young adult Community Experts—especially those with a history of mental health challenges and substance use disorders as architects of systems change within and beyond the Tower Foundation.

5.2 CET Learning and Outcomes Frameworks in Practice

- The CET Learning Framework shows how guiding principles translate into internal practices (e.g., stipends, accommodations), external practices (e.g., co-designed RFPs, grant decisions), and cross-cutting learning processes (e.g., continuous feedback loops).
- The CET Outcomes Framework connects these practices to participant, foundation, and community outcomes—advancing leadership, trust, and system-level change.

These frameworks have already begun to guide internal reflection and can serve as touchstones for future planning, board education, and communications with the field.

A CET member votes for her favorite applications at the Buffalo retreat.



6. Implications & Recommendations

This evaluation is intentionally grounded in both **program intent** and **participant experience**. On one hand, CET’s purpose is clearly articulated: to center young adult lived experience in grant decisions, create spaces of connection and belonging, and help the Foundation practice more equitable philanthropy. On the other hand, Community Experts, alumni, support partners, staff, trustees, and grantee partners described how those intentions show up—or don’t—in the day-to-day realities of meetings, roles, and decisions.

Where there is alignment, we see confirmation that CET’s design is working as hoped. Where there is friction—such as differing views on leadership pathways, preparedness for certain roles, or the balance between support and autonomy—we treat that as **useful learning**, not as evidence that one side is “right” and the other is “wrong.” The implications and recommendations that follow are offered in that spirit: as invitations to keep refining CET so that its structures, practices, and opportunities stay closely tethered to both the Foundation’s aims and the lived experiences of the young adults who make the Community Experts Team possible.

This section organizes implications and recommendations across three levels: CET design and facilitation, Tower Foundation strategy and practice, and external field learning.

6.1 Nurturing Possibility for Community Experts (CET Design & Facilitation)

6.1.1 Make leadership opportunities clearer—while keeping CET’s core purpose at the center

Implication:

CET is already nurturing leadership, confidence, and advocacy, but opportunities to “step up” can feel ad hoc or hard to see. At the same time, staff are cautious about creating a rigid leadership ladder that might overshadow CET’s core purpose—being part of a decision-making body, building connections, and making a difference in communities—and might not fit the range of abilities and interests on the team. There are also questions about whether current referral pathways are reaching the full diversity of young adults who could benefit from CET.

Recommendations:

- **Co-create a “menu of ways to be involved,” not a hierarchy.** With Community Experts, develop a simple, visual menu that names different optional ways to contribute (for example, co-facilitating short activities, co-presenting with staff or partner organizations, joining planning conversations, welcoming new members, or participating in alumni activities). Emphasize that all roles are voluntary and equally valued—there is no single “top” role.
- **Use orientation to normalize different levels of engagement.** In orientation, be explicit that CET’s primary purpose is shared decision-making and connection, and that leadership can look many ways: speaking in large groups, contributing in chat, curating a music playlist, listening deeply, helping with logistics, or sharing ideas one-on-one. Introduce the “menu of ways to be involved” as options people can choose over time, not expectations everyone must meet. When possible, invite one or two CET alumni to share brief reflections on how CET has shaped their leadership and where they are now.

- **Offer low-stakes, well-supported opportunities.** When inviting members to take on visible roles (for example, issue spotlights, short reflections, or helping facilitate an activity), provide scaffolding: prompts, examples, an option to present with a peer or support partner, and the ability to opt out without pressure. This keeps opportunities accessible to members with different comfort levels, communication styles, and support needs.
- **Design alumni roles as flexible and interest-driven.** Rather than a formal alumni “track,” invite interested alumni to indicate what kinds of contributions feel energizing (such as peer mentoring, serving as occasional reviewers, acting as ambassadors/storytellers, or taking on contract roles like Community Grants Consultants). Match opportunities to those interests and capacities so that leadership grows from what participants want to do, not from a pre-set ladder.
- **Broaden outreach so referral pathways align with equity goals.** Work with referral and support partners to reflect on who is not currently at the table and to expand recruitment beyond the “most ready” or most visible young adults. This could include:
 - sharing a short, strengths-based description of who CET is for that emphasizes lived experience and potential rather than existing leadership titles or communication style;
 - inviting partners to consider young adults who may be more marginalized, less connected to services, or still building confidence—and naming that CET is designed to support a range of abilities and comfort levels; and
 - piloting complementary outreach routes (for example, direct outreach to youth-led groups, a simple self-nomination process with a reference, or partnerships with organizations that serve young adults who are less likely to be in formal leadership programs).

These adjustments would help ensure that leadership remains an important outcome—not a requirement—and that young adults who could benefit most from CET have meaningful opportunities to participate.

6.1.2 Co-create agendas and protect against extractive storytelling.

Implication:

CET members value spaces where their experiences are honored without pressure to disclose personal or traumatic stories.

Recommendations:

- Invite CET members to **co-create meeting and retreat agendas**, including identifying what topics feel most important to them and when they may want to share lived experience.
- Offer explicit language such as: *“You never have to share personal stories to be a leader here. Your insight and ideas are powerful on their own.”*
- When stories are shared, provide options for **structured support** (for example, debrief time, support partner check-ins, or access to resources).

Sharing Lived Experience with Care

- CET honors lived experience as expertise.
- Sharing personal stories is always **optional**, never required.
- Members can contribute insight in many ways—through analysis, questions, examples, and ideas for change.
- Facilitators and support partners help create safe, non-extractive spaces for storytelling when and if members choose to share.

6.1.3 Clarify expectations for support partners and review partners.

Implication:

Support partners sometimes fill silence or guide conversation in ways that unintentionally overshadow team member voice.

Recommendations:

- Develop a brief **orientation** for support partners that clarifies:
 - The primary goal is to **support team member leadership**, not to lead discussions;
 - When to step back and allow team members to speak first;
 - How to assist with logistics (tech, note-taking, reminders) without dominating conversation.
- For support partners, provide a short **'role in the room'** guide focused on how they can best support active and meaningful participation for individual team members—managing social anxiety, group dynamics, technology, and time management—while keeping young adult Community Experts centered in discussion and decision-making.

6.1.4 Provide historic Community Experts Fund context.

Implication:

CET members want to see how their decisions connect to a larger legacy of support.

Recommendations:

- Share a **simple, visually accessible overview** of previous Community Experts Fund grants (for example, types of organizations funded and examples of past projects).
- Incorporate this overview into orientation, mid-year check-ins, and the retreat so each cohort sees itself as part of a growing story of possibility.

6.1.5 Make feedback loops more visible.

Implication:

CET members sometimes struggle to see how their feedback influences practice.

Recommendations:

- After major shifts (such as changes to meeting formats, communications, or tools), send a short **"You said / We did"** update that connects the dots between input and action.
- Use the Possibility Lab insights to shape a brief **annual summary** of what changed because of CET's voices, shared back with members and partners.

6.1.6 Continue to invest in accessibility and pacing.

Implication:

Accessibility practices are strong but require ongoing attention.

Recommendations:

- Periodically invite CET members to share **what is working well and what could be adjusted** regarding tech, language, and pace.
- When feasible, **offer multiple options** for engagement (for example, pre-reading in plain language, short video explanations, and visual summaries of complex processes).

6.2 Nurturing Possibility within the Tower Foundation (Strategy & Practice)

6.2.1 Use the Learning and Outcomes Frameworks as internal guides.

Recommendations:

- Integrate the **CET Learning Framework** into staff reflections and program planning meetings, asking: “*Where are we strongest? Where is there room to deepen practice?*”
- Use the **Outcomes Framework** to track progress over multiple years, noting shifts in participant, foundation, and community outcomes.

6.2.2 Deepen board connection while honoring CET autonomy.

Implication:

Trustees are supportive of CET and curious about deeper engagement; CET members are curious about how their work fits into the broader Foundation but are not expected to advise on specific board decisions.

Recommendations:

- Explore **learning-focused interactions** between CET members and trustees (for example, joint learning sessions, story circles, or panels) that:
 - Highlight CET experiences and insights;
 - Invite trustees to reflect on implications for governance and strategy;
 - Preserve CET’s independent decision-making authority over Community Experts Fund grants.
- Consider longer-term possibilities such as **alumni CET members serving on committees or advisory groups**, building pathways from participatory grantmaking to formal governance roles over time, if that aligns with the Foundation’s evolving strategy.

6.2.3 Apply concurrent and emergent learning practices across portfolios.

- Continue using **memos, observation notes, and reflection tools** as real-time learning supports, not only for CET but for other initiatives.
- Encourage staff to periodically ask: “*What are we learning with CET that might strengthen how we engage other communities?*”

6.2.4 Continue to reduce technology-related participation barriers

Implication:

Some Community Experts and support partners experienced technology barriers—such as low internet strength, frozen screens, audio drop-offs, and needing to log in by phone—that made it harder to stay engaged in the full conversation, even when tech support was available.

Recommendation:

Build on current practices to make CET even more “low-bandwidth friendly” and predictable from a tech standpoint. This could include:

- **Asking about tech access upfront.** Include brief questions in intake forms and one-on-ones about internet reliability, devices, and preferred ways to join meetings, so staff can plan support in advance.
- **Offering optional tech run-throughs.** Before key sessions (e.g., practice review, decision meetings), offer a short optional “tech check” where Community Experts can test Zoom links, audio, and screen-sharing with staff.

- **Designing for low-bandwidth participation.** Continue sharing slides and materials in advance; build sessions so people can still follow along if they need to join by phone or with camera off (for example, reading key questions aloud, using the chat to summarize, and pausing to confirm understanding).
- **Providing targeted support where possible.** When feasible, explore supports such as data stipends, loaner devices, or connecting Community Experts to wi-fi-enabled community spaces (libraries, partner organizations) for key meetings.
- **Naming tech norms and backup options.** At the start of each meeting, remind the team how to access other forms of tech support, what to do if they get dropped, and that it is okay to rejoin by phone if the internet becomes unstable.

These steps build on practices already in place and help ensure that internet strength or device access does not become a primary barrier to full participation.

6.3 Nurturing Possibility in the Field (External Learning & Influence)

6.3.1 Share CET as a case of Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ in practice.

- Build on the **GEO Perspectives** piece by developing additional field-facing products (for example, blogs, conference sessions, toolkits) that highlight:
 - CET’s focus on young adults with a history of mental health challenges and substance use disorders;
 - concrete tools like the internal autism-informed messaging and meeting reflections memo developed during the evaluation as an internal staff learning resource, group agreements, and Possibility Lab materials; and
 - lessons about sharing power, protecting against extractive storytelling, and creating flexible, accessible ways for ongoing participation and leadership.

6.3.2 Offer adaptable tools to other funders.

- Curate a small set of “**CET Tools for the Field**” that might include:
 - The CET Learning and Outcomes Frameworks;
 - Sample agendas or slides (for example, “Identifying Bias in Grant Review”);
 - The Possibility Lab poster prompts;
 - Anonymized examples of CET communications (welcome emails, check-ins, and “you said/ we did” updates).

6.3.3 Continue benchmarking and peer exchange.

- Revisit the **benchmarking report** periodically to see how CET remains aligned with or ahead of emerging practices.
- Engage in peer exchange with other participatory grantmakers to share insights and learn from others experimenting with youth-led and disability-centered models.



CET members connect at a site visit during a regional meet-up on Martha's Vineyard.

CET members participate in grant review deliberations at the Buffalo retreat.



7. Nurturing Possibility Forward: CET's Evolving Legacy and Most Promising Future

Peter and Elizabeth Tower's legacy is rooted in a simple conviction: people who encounter barriers deserve structures that recognize their dignity, honor their insight, and expand their opportunities. The Community Experts Team and Community Experts Fund translate that conviction into daily practice by sharing real power with young adult Community Experts—many of whom are neurodivergent or have intellectual and learning disabilities, mental health challenges, or substance use experiences—and trusting them to decide how philanthropic dollars should move.

This evaluation set out to explore a central question:

What will it take to ensure that the Community Experts Team (CET) program advances equity and participation in ways that meaningfully reflect, respond to, and are shaped by the lived experiences of its participants?

The evidence suggests that many of the necessary conditions are already present:

- **Equity and participation are built into CET's architecture**—from decision-making power to stipends and accessibility supports that make leadership possible for young people who have too often been excluded.
- **Participants are gaining confidence, networks, and systemic influence** that extend well beyond CET meetings, carrying possibility into classrooms, workplaces, families, and communities.
- **The Tower Foundation is embracing learning and adaptation** through concurrent evaluation, the Possibility Lab, and public storytelling that lifts up young people's voices for a broader philanthropic audience.

At the same time, the work of nurturing possibility is ongoing, not finished. The recommendations in this report point toward a next chapter where:

- **Each CET cohort builds on the last**, inheriting not only a structure but a living legacy of team-led decisions, refined practices, and expanding opportunity.
- CET members have **even more structured paths to lead and grow**—facilitating sessions, shaping agendas, presenting issue spotlights, and stepping into alumni roles that extend their influence over time.
- Support partners, review partners, staff, and trustees are **deeply aligned around team-centered roles and expectations**, ensuring that young adults with a history of mental health challenges and substance use disorders remain at the center of the work.
- Feedback loops and alumni pathways make **CET's impact visible and durable**, turning one and two-year experiences into long-term leadership journeys.
- The Tower Foundation continues to **stand alongside communities as they design and drive systems change**, using CET learning to inform broader strategy and to contribute practice-based insights to peers across the field.

In that sense, this report is both a celebration of what has already been built and an invitation to what comes next. CET is not a one-time experiment; it is an evolving practice in which each cohort deepens the Tower family's vision and widens the circle of who is trusted to lead.

The path forward is clear: keep building a philanthropic practice where communities are not just consulted but centered, not simply included but leading—and where possibility is nurtured at every level, from individual participants to the Foundation to the broader field of philanthropy. Each new CET cohort is an opportunity to carry that legacy further and to model what youth-participatory, equity-centered grantmaking can become.

Acknowledgments

The L.E.A.D. Agency extends deep gratitude to the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation for the opportunity to walk alongside you on this learning journey.

Thank you to the Community Experts Team members, their Support and Referral Partners, Grant Review Partners, and Tower Foundation trustees and staff who shared their time, insight, and lived experience so generously. Your leadership, honesty, and imagination made this evaluation—and the possibilities it points toward—truly possible.

CET members at the Buffalo retreat.



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9. About The L.E.A.D. Agency and Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler

About The L.E.A.D. Agency

The L.E.A.D. Agency is a social impact firm that helps philanthropy share power with youth and communities. Inspired by Founder Dr. Kimberlin Butler’s classroom mantra—Learn, Excel, Achieve, and discover your Destiny—the agency partners with foundations and networks to turn values like equity, inclusion, and shared leadership into concrete practice.

The L.E.A.D. Agency’s work spans a continuum of support, including:

- **Philanthropic practice and program design**—developing youth-participatory and lived-experience-centered grantmaking models rooted in Youth-Possible Philanthropy™;
- **Strategy advising**—helping foundations, boards, and partner organizations clarify outcomes, build learning-centered strategies, and align portfolios with community-defined goals;
- **Partnership engagement and convenings**—curating collaborative spaces, retreats, and learning exchanges that bring funders, grantees, and community leaders together;
- **Community and public engagement**—designing approaches that deepen meaningful participation, build capacity, and strengthen trust with communities; and
- **Research, learning, and evaluation**—using participatory, equity-centered methods to surface community insight, inform decision-making, and support adaptive strategy over time.

Across these services, The L.E.A.D. Agency centers youth and community experts as co-strategists—helping philanthropy move from “doing for” to building with those most impacted by systems change.

About Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler

Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler is a Certified Impact Philanthropy Advisor (IPA) and Founder & Chief Possibility Catalyst of The L.E.A.D. Agency. She helps philanthropy share power with youth and communities by redesigning grantmaking, learning, and strategy so that lived-experience leaders are at the center.

She began her philanthropy career in a family foundation in Atlanta, where she shaped investments in human services, health, and the arts and hosted grantee capacity-building convenings. That early experience—sitting alongside families, nonprofits, and community leaders—continues to ground her belief that philanthropy is most powerful when it listens deeply and builds with, not just for, communities.

A philanthropy advisor, evaluator, and field-builder, Dr. Butler’s work focuses on elevating youth and community leaders as co-strategists in systems change. She is the architect of the Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ framework, featured in *The Foundation Review* (2025), and co-author of the GEO *Perspectives* piece, “Power Shared, Possibility Realized: Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ in Practice at the Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation,” written in partnership with Tower Foundation staff.

A former classroom teacher, foundation trustee, and philanthropy practitioner, she now serves as a learning and strategy partner to multiple foundations. Her practice is grounded in culturally responsive, equity-centered approaches and in a deep belief that young people and community experts already hold the wisdom needed to transform systems.

10. Appendices

Appendix A. Data Collection Overview

Data Source	Description	Volume / Notes
Interviews	Semi-structured conversations with key stakeholders about participation, equity, leadership, and process.	25 total: current CET members, alumni CET members, family/support partners, referral partners, grant partners, Tower Foundation staff, and trustees.
Observations— Virtual Sessions	Structured observations of CET virtual meetings, including grant review and decision-making sessions.	Multiple sessions observed across the 2025 cycle, with notes on facilitation, accessibility supports, engagement dynamics, and youth-adult power-sharing.
Observations— Buffalo Retreat	In-person observation of the October 2025 CET retreat, including the Possibility Lab.	Full retreat day observed, with attention to group process, accessibility, and co-interpretation of data.
Surveys and Session Evaluations	Online participant surveys capture perceptions of influence, empowerment, accessibility, and satisfaction.	Pre-/mid-/post-reflections and post-session or post-retreat surveys completed by CET members and, in some cases, partners.
Program Documents	Community Experts Fund RFPs and application materials; meeting agendas, slides, and communications.	Used to trace how CET shaped priorities, criteria, and process design.
CET Retreat Artifacts	Possibility Lab posters on Participation & Voice, Empowerment & Leadership, Equity & Accessibility, and Process & Supports, plus sticky-note reactions.	Used to surface CET member interpretations of data and new possibilities for the model.
Equity and Accessibility Tools	Autism-informed messaging and meeting reflections memo, sample group agreements for youth-participatory spaces, and related tools.	Reviewed to understand how accessibility and equity commitments are operationalized.
Framework Visuals	CET Learning Framework and CET Outcomes Framework.	Used as interpretive lenses for findings and recommendations.
Benchmarking and Field Scan	Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report—May 2025 and selected participatory grantmaking literature.	Used to situate CET in a national context and identify field-level implications.
Historical and Context Documents	Selected Tower Foundation history materials, GEO <i>Perspectives</i> article, and prior communications about CET.	Used to connect CET’s evolution to the founders’ vision and the Foundation’s broader strategy.

Appendix B. CET and Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ Alignment Table

This appendix reproduces the Youth-Possible Philanthropy™ alignment table for quick reference

YPP Element	Definition	How CET Demonstrates It
Youth Participatory Grantmaking	Youth and lived-experience leaders have real decision-making power.	CET members co-design the Community Experts Fund RFP, review applications, and decide how to allocate approximately \$350,000 annually.
Trust-Based Philanthropy (within YPP)	Culture grounded in trust, transparency, learning, and mutual accountability.	The Tower Foundation shares power, invites community expertise, and builds reciprocal trust through open communication, stipends, accessibility supports, and transparency about grantmaking processes. Community Grant Consultants bring community voice into broader portfolio conversations.
Equity-Centered Approach	Centered on historically resilient and excluded youth; addressing systemic inequities is a core goal; equity and accessibility embedded throughout design.	Grounded in the Tower Foundation's ethos of equity, humility, and accessibility, CET integrates accommodations, neurodiversity supports, stipends, and intentional inclusion of young adults with a history of mental health challenges and substance use disorders.
Multi-Sector Collaboration	Cross-sector ecosystem of support, engagement, and accountability.	Referral, support, and review partners connect schools, community-based organizations, disability service providers, and nonprofits—helping to sustain equity across systems and connect CET to broader networks.
Participatory Learning	Co-interpretation of data and shared reflection.	The Possibility Lab and follow-on discussions create spaces where youth, staff, and partners interpret learning together in real time, shaping recommendations and next steps.
Possibility Development	Philanthropy as a catalyst for leadership growth, social capital, and self-actualization.	CET members build skills, confidence, and networks; alumni move into staff, advisory, and board roles. The Foundation commissioned a CET logo designed by a team member, investing directly in their creative skills and voice.

Appendix C.

Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report, May 2025

Dr. Kimberlin Butler

This appendix includes the full Tower Foundation CET Benchmarking Report—May 2025, which is referenced throughout Section 4 (“What We Heard: Participation, Leadership, Equity, and Experience”) and in the implications and recommendations. The main report summarizes key insights; this appendix is provided so trustees and staff can review the complete benchmarking analysis, comparative models, and field literature in more depth.

Table of Contents

Introduction	<u>48</u>
Defining Participatory Grantmaking and its Significance	<u>48</u>
Overview of Participatory Grantmaking Initiatives in the United States.....	<u>49</u>
In-Depth Analysis of Participatory Grantmaking Models	<u>49</u>
Goals and Intended Outcomes of Participatory Grantmaking	<u>52</u>
Evaluation of Participatory Grantmaking Initiatives.....	<u>53</u>
Best Practices, Challenges, and Lessons Learned.....	<u>54</u>
Comparative Analysis of Models and Outcomes	<u>55</u>
Benchmarking the CET Model: Peer Comparisons in Participatory Grantmaking.....	<u>56</u>
Synthesis and Insights for the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation	<u>57</u>
Conclusion	<u>57</u>
Works Cited	<u>58</u>

Introduction

The Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation has demonstrated a commitment to effective grantmaking, and as part of this commitment, it has adopted participatory grantmaking approaches¹. To further enhance its grantmaking practices, the Foundation seeks to benchmark its evaluation of these participatory initiatives against relevant initiatives and practices across the United States. This report aims to fulfill this need by researching various participatory grantmaking endeavors within the US philanthropic landscape. Understanding the broader context of how other organizations are implementing and evaluating participatory grantmaking can provide valuable insights for the Foundation to refine its own evaluation framework. By examining the experiences of others, the Foundation can identify effective evaluation strategies, gain a deeper understanding of common challenges encountered in this field, and adopt recognized best practices to strengthen its approach. This report will explore the definition and significance of participatory grantmaking, provide an overview of relevant initiatives in the United States, analyze different models of participatory grantmaking, investigate their goals and intended outcomes, examine available evaluations, synthesize best practices and challenges, compare various models and their reported outcomes, and finally, offer insights and recommendations for benchmarking the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation's evaluation efforts.

Defining Participatory Grantmaking and its Significance

Participatory grantmaking, at its core, is the practice of ceding decision-making power regarding the allocation of funding to the very communities that are intended to benefit from those funds². This approach signifies a fundamental shift in traditional philanthropic practice, where funding decisions have historically been the purview of foundation staff and boards. Various organizations and resources consistently define participatory grantmaking by this central tenet of redistributing authority². This shared understanding underscores the well-established nature of this concept within the philanthropic sector.

The rationale behind adopting participatory grantmaking stems from a recognition of the inherent power imbalances that exist between grantmakers and the communities they serve². This model is driven by a commitment to more just and equitable practices, aiming to address social, economic, and racial inequities³. It embodies a values-based and equity-centered approach to philanthropy³. Participatory grantmaking moves beyond the traditional focus on a specific group as the beneficiary of an organization's mission; instead, it actively involves individuals from diverse backgrounds in strategy development and the guiding of work, ensuring their expertise is valued and incorporated into decision-making processes². This approach elevates the voices of those who are often unheard, placing affected communities at the center of grantmaking by empowering them to decide who and what to fund².

The anticipated benefits of participatory grantmaking are numerous. It can lead to a better alignment of funding with the actual needs and priorities of communities⁶, fostering increased community trust and engagement³. By involving community members in the decision-making process, foundations can identify new initiatives and fund organizations that might operate outside their traditional networks³. This collaborative approach also strengthens the relationships between funders and the communities they aim to serve³. Furthermore, individuals participating in these processes can gain valuable professional skills and a deeper understanding of the intricacies of philanthropy⁹. Ultimately, participatory grantmaking is viewed as a strategic approach to enhance the effectiveness and overall impact of philanthropic endeavors by leveraging the knowledge and lived experiences of community members and fostering stronger, more equitable partnerships.

Overview of Participatory Grantmaking Initiatives in the United States

Numerous foundations and organizations across the United States have embraced participatory grantmaking as a core element of their philanthropic strategy. These include national foundations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)⁶, which launched the Building Local Alignment initiative, and the Ben & Jerry's Foundation¹⁰ with its National Grassroots Organizing Program. Community foundations such as the Women's Foundation of Minnesota (WFM)⁹ have also been pioneers in this area, engaging community members in their grantmaking decisions for decades. Other notable actors include the Partnership for Better Health², the Foundation for Black Communities¹¹, and various initiatives supported by organizations like JustFund³ and the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy¹². These entities demonstrate a broad spectrum of engagement with participatory grantmaking principles.

Several platforms and networks actively support and promote the practice of participatory grantmaking. JustFund³ serves as a grantmaking platform that aims to reset philanthropy by breaking down barriers and moving resources to historically excluded communities, with many of its grantmakers actively engaging in participatory practices. The Participatory Grantmaking Community⁵ offers resources and facilitates connections among practitioners in this field. Candid's GrantCraft³ provides valuable guides and resources on participatory grantmaking. The Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University¹² conducts research and publishes case studies to inform and advance power-shifting in philanthropy. The Fund for Shared Insight¹³ also plays a significant role in developing tools and insights for participatory philanthropy. The existence of these dedicated platforms and resource centers signifies a growing and increasingly organized field of practice.

Participatory grantmaking initiatives are being implemented across various geographic locations in the United States and focus on a wide range of social and environmental issues. For instance, RWJF's Building Local Alignment initiative operates across the nation⁶, while the Partnership for Better Health focuses on its regional service area². Ben & Jerry's Foundation supports grassroots organizing throughout the US and its territories¹⁰. The EPA's Thriving Communities Grantmakers program addresses environmental justice concerns in specific regions¹⁴. The Women's Foundation of Minnesota centers its work on gender and racial justice within the state⁹. This geographic diversity and the variety of focus areas, including health equity, social justice, environmental protection, and community development, illustrate the adaptable nature and broad applicability of participatory grantmaking as a tool for addressing diverse community needs across the United States.

In-Depth Analysis of Participatory Grantmaking Models

Community-led grantmaking is characterized by the central role of community members, those directly affected by the issues at hand, in making the primary decisions about funding. The Partnership for Better Health's Participatory Grantmaking Project serves as a compelling example². Their initiative is guided by a cohort of community members deeply invested in the health and life outcomes of their peers. This group has been instrumental in developing the process and framework for the project, ensuring it reflects the specific needs of their service area. They have even created their first grantmaking opportunity focused on addressing loneliness and social isolation, demonstrating how community members can be involved from the very inception of a grant program to its final implementation. This approach underscores the potential for community members to shape the entire grantmaking framework, from defining funding priorities to making the ultimate funding decisions.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Building Local Alignment Initiative provides another significant example of community-led grantmaking⁶. This initiative aims to advance racial and health equity by ceding grantmaking power to individuals most affected by racism and health inequities. RWJF has partnered with intermediary organizations like Brooklyn Communities Collaborative, I Be Black Girl, and Movement Strategy Center to lead inclusive grantmaking processes at the local level. These intermediaries will, in turn, identify and fund²⁰ grantees across the United States who will design their own participatory grantmaking

processes tailored to their specific community's needs and priorities. This model illustrates how a large national foundation can collaborate with community-based intermediaries to effectively implement participatory grantmaking at a localized level, leveraging the on-the-ground knowledge and connections of these partner organizations.

The Ben & Jerry's Foundation's National Grassroots Organizing Program further exemplifies community-led grantmaking by providing unrestricted, general operating support to small, constituent-led grassroots organizations throughout the United States¹⁰. Their approach prioritizes funding organizations where the people directly impacted by the issues the organization works on hold clear decision-making power. This focus on supporting organizations that are inherently community-led ensures that funding decisions directly align with the priorities and strategies determined by those most affected by the challenges being addressed, reinforcing the principle of community ownership and control.

The Foundation for Black Communities has adopted a highly participatory model where applicants themselves are invited to become part of the grant review panel¹¹. This peer review process allows individuals connected to the proposed projects—including program managers, participants, and volunteers—to read proposals, provide scores and feedback, and ultimately make collective funding decisions based on their rankings. This innovative approach directly embodies the principle of shifting power and democratizing philanthropic decision-making by giving potential grantees a significant voice in determining how funds are allocated.

Government initiatives are also increasingly incorporating community-led grantmaking principles. The EPA's Thriving Communities Grantmakers Subgrants, funded through the Inflation Reduction Act, will distribute significant funding to community-based nonprofit organizations and other eligible entities representing historically marginalized communities to address environmental or public health issues¹⁴. These grants are intended to support community-led projects that improve air or water quality, increase access to quality nutrition, provide green job training, and more, demonstrating the application of participatory grantmaking principles in addressing environmental concerns at the local level. Similarly, Philanthropy Northwest's Thriving Communities Grants aim to fund community-led projects in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington that support the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in shaping their local environments¹⁵. This regional effort underscores the growing recognition of the importance of community leadership in environmental grantmaking.

In the realm of place-based grantmaking, some initiatives prioritize funding small grassroots organizations led by individuals with deep connections within the community⁷. A notable example occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, where donors focused on supporting such organizations, often led by people of color, who could rapidly reach undocumented families through their personal networks to provide essential support like access to vaccines and state benefits. Providing funding directly to these community-owned organizations empowered them to design their own strategies and ensured that resources were deployed efficiently and effectively based on their intimate understanding of local needs. This illustrates how a focus on specific geographic communities can naturally lead to participatory approaches by empowering local actors who are best positioned to understand and address community challenges.

Community-led grantmaking initiatives employ a variety of decision-making processes. Some organize councils of leaders with lived experience who define the grantmaking criteria, put out calls for proposals, discuss applications, and ultimately award grants³. Others, like the Foundation for Black Communities, utilize collective voting and ranking systems where applicants participate in the decision-making¹¹. Participatory budgeting, where community members directly decide how to spend a portion of public funds, also represents a form of community-led resource allocation¹⁶. These diverse mechanisms, ranging from consensus-based models to more direct voting systems, all aim to ensure that funding choices reflect the priorities and expertise of the community being served.

Youth-led grantmaking specifically empowers young people to have the primary decision-making authority over grant allocations. The Sillerman Center's Youth Philanthropy project actively investigates

this model as a means to make grantmaking more democratic, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of historically underserved communities¹². This dedicated focus highlights the growing recognition of youth philanthropy as a distinct and valuable form of participatory grantmaking. The Greater Worcester Community Foundation's Youth for Community Improvement Program serves as a compelling case study demonstrating the positive impacts of involving youth in grantmaking processes¹². This program illustrates how youth philanthropy can effectively democratize philanthropy while simultaneously providing significant benefits to the young people involved.

The Women's Foundation of Minnesota also integrates youth voices into their grantmaking through their Young Women's Committee⁹. This committee, which includes young people aged 16–24¹⁶ and older, plays a key role in making decisions about WFM's grantmaking, demonstrating the integration of youth perspectives into the grantmaking operations of established foundations. The unique benefits of youth-led grantmaking extend beyond simply funding youth-related initiatives. It empowers young people, fosters their civic engagement, and ensures that grantmaking is more directly responsive to the needs and priorities of youth¹². By actively participating in grantmaking, young people gain valuable practical skills in leadership, decision-making, and community engagement, contributing to their personal and civic development while ensuring that philanthropic resources are directed effectively.

A growing framework that complements these youth-led models is Youth-Possible Philanthropy™, which conceptualizes youth as co-creators of philanthropic strategy, governance, and systems change¹³. Developed by Dr. Kimberlin Butler and featured in *The Foundation Review*, this approach expands the scope of youth participation beyond grant decision-making to include leadership in institutional learning and field-building efforts. It emphasizes trust-based relationships, equity-centered design, and the integration of youth with lived experience in shaping the direction of philanthropy itself. This framework aligns with initiatives like the Community Experts Team, which not only engages young people in funding decisions but also supports their development as civic leaders and strategic thinkers within the philanthropic ecosystem.

Expert panel approaches in participatory grantmaking involve the participation of individuals with specific expertise or lived experience relevant to the funding area in the grant review and decision-making process. The Partnership for Better Health's cohort of community members guiding their project can be considered experts by virtue of their lived experiences with the issues being addressed². This highlights that the definition of "expert" in this context extends beyond professional credentials to include the valuable insights gained through direct experience. Similarly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's advisory committee, comprised of community stakeholders, guiding their Building Local Alignment initiative represents an expert panel convened to inform the development and implementation of their participatory grantmaking efforts⁶.

The Tower Foundation intentionally engages individuals with diverse abilities and lived experiences through expert panel approaches. Its Community Experts Team comprises young adults—many of whom navigate intellectual and learning disabilities, mental health challenges, or substance use disorders—who collaboratively shape grantmaking strategies. In addition, its Community Grant Consultants bring lived expertise to the grant review process, working alongside program officers to ensure funding decisions are grounded in community¹. This example is particularly relevant as it directly reflects the user's context. JustFund organizes councils of leaders with lived experience who play a central role in defining grantmaking criteria and awarding grants, emphasizing the importance of centering the voices of those most impacted by funding decisions³. The Women's Foundation of Minnesota's grantmaking committees also incorporate community expertise by including community leaders and program alumni who bring their valuable insights to the grantmaking process⁹. The level of influence that expert panels wield in participatory grantmaking can vary. In some cases, they may serve in an advisory capacity, providing recommendations to the funder, while in other models, they may have direct decision-making power over grant allocations³. This variation reflects the different philosophies and goals that funders hold regarding the extent of power sharing in their participatory grantmaking initiatives.

Beyond these primary models, other notable approaches exist. Giving circles represent a form of participatory grantmaking where a group of individuals pool their financial resources and collectively decide which organizations or causes to support¹². This model is driven by the collective giving and shared decision-making among the donors themselves. Flow funding, also known as onward granting, involves a funder selecting another individual or organization to independently pass on grant funding to others¹⁶. This approach delegates grantmaking authority to trusted intermediaries who often have closer ties to specific communities or fields. Closed and open collective models represent more direct forms of participatory grantmaking where applicants and other interested parties participate in collective decision-making processes, often through voting or consensus-based methods¹⁶. These models emphasize shared responsibility and decision-making among a broader group of stakeholders.

Goals and Intended Outcomes of Participatory Grantmaking

A central goal of many participatory grantmaking initiatives is to actively promote equity and justice within the philanthropic sector and the wider community. These initiatives aim to advance racial and health equity by centering the voices and priorities of those most affected by systemic inequities⁶. They seek to address social, economic, and racial disparities by empowering historically marginalized communities to direct resources towards solutions they deem most effective³. For organizations like the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, a primary focus is on centering gender and racial justice in their grantmaking through participatory processes⁹.

Another key intended outcome of participatory grantmaking is the empowerment of communities. By giving communities the agency to make decisions about funding, these initiatives aim to uplift and strengthen them³. The goal is to build community power by establishing those most affected by issues as decision-makers⁶. This approach fosters constituent empowerment and ensures that those with lived experience have a clear voice and decision-making power in the allocation of resources¹⁰.

Participatory grantmaking is also intended to improve the overall effectiveness and relevance of philanthropic investments. By involving community members in the process, funders aim to make grantmaking more democratic, inclusive, and directly responsive to the needs of underserved communities¹². The goal is to ensure that funding genuinely meets the specific needs and priorities identified by the community itself⁶. Furthermore, this approach can help funders identify new and innovative initiatives and support organizations that might operate outside of traditional philanthropic networks³.

Building trust and fostering strong relationships between funders and the communities they serve is another significant objective of participatory grantmaking. By promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in both the process and the outcomes, these initiatives aim to strengthen community trust in grantmaking organizations³. The intention is to move away from traditional top-down approaches and build important, collaborative relationships with the communities being funded⁹.

Ultimately, a fundamental goal underpinning participatory grantmaking is to shift the unequal power dynamics that have historically characterized philanthropy². This approach recognizes the inherent imbalances in traditional funding models and actively seeks to redistribute decision-making authority to those who are most directly impacted by the issues being addressed.

Evaluation of Participatory Grantmaking Initiatives

Evaluating participatory grantmaking initiatives presents unique challenges due to their emphasis on process, empowerment, and community-defined outcomes, in addition to traditional measures of impact⁸. Traditional evaluation frameworks, often designed to assess outcomes defined by funders, may not fully capture the nuances and broader impacts of participatory approaches. It becomes crucial to consider whose perspectives and values are central to the evaluation process⁸. Measuring the impact on power dynamics within communities and the development of community capacity also poses significant challenges¹⁹.

In response to these complexities, the field of evaluation in participatory grantmaking is evolving towards more inclusive and community-centered approaches. There is a growing interest in participatory evaluation, which actively involves stakeholders in the evaluation process, from defining questions to interpreting findings⁸. Methods like the Most Significant Change approach are being utilized to capture outcomes that are most meaningful to the community members themselves²¹. Narrative and storytelling methodologies are also gaining recognition as valuable tools for understanding the impact of these initiatives⁸. The focus of evaluation is increasingly shifting towards learning and adaptation, rather than solely on making judgments about success or failure⁸.

Several organizations are actively engaged in evaluating their participatory grantmaking efforts. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Building Local Alignment Initiative, while relatively new, has already produced a case study titled "Participatory Grantmaking in Practice"⁶. This document offers an initial look at their processes and the insights gained, serving as an early form of evaluation and a guide for future work. The Women's Foundation of Minnesota, with its long history of participatory grantmaking, likely incorporates ongoing evaluation through its engagement with community members on various committees, even though specific evaluation reports were not explicitly detailed in the provided material⁹. The Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy, through its research and publication of case studies on various participatory grantmaking models, including those focused on youth philanthropy and community recovery, provides valuable documentation that likely includes evaluation findings⁴. The Fund for Shared Insight has developed a Participatory Philanthropy Toolkit and has published reports on evaluating participatory grantmaking processes, offering practical tools and frameworks for assessment¹³. JustFund, while emphasizing trust-based approaches, is also increasingly incorporating community members into the evaluation phase of grantmaking, reflecting a broader trend towards more participatory assessment methods³.

Best Practices, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

Several best practices have emerged from the experiences of organizations implementing participatory grantmaking. A fundamental practice is genuinely valuing and incorporating the expertise of individuals with lived experience, recognizing their unique insights². It is crucial to cede real decision-making power to community members, moving beyond mere advisory roles³. Ensuring inclusive and representative participation on participatory panels, considering diverse demographic factors and lived experiences, is also paramount²⁸. Clear communication about the process, roles, and limitations is essential for building trust and managing expectations¹³. Providing adequate training and ongoing support to community members involved in grantmaking helps equip them for their roles²⁸. Fairly compensating community members for their time and contributions demonstrates respect for their expertise and commitment⁸. Building and maintaining trust with participating communities requires an ongoing effort and genuine commitment to partnership³. Being flexible and adapting the participatory model to the specific context and needs of the community is also a key to success². Continuously applying an equity lens throughout the design and implementation process ensures that the initiative remains focused on addressing systemic inequities⁹. Finally, fostering a culture of ongoing learning and reflection based on feedback and evaluation is vital for continuous improvement⁸.

Despite its benefits, participatory grantmaking presents several challenges. It can be more time-consuming and resource-intensive compared to traditional grantmaking approaches, requiring careful planning and allocation of resources²². Truly shifting power dynamics and addressing existing power imbalances remains an ongoing challenge that requires intentional effort and awareness². Defining what constitutes the “community” and ensuring equitable representation of diverse voices within that community can be complex²⁸. There is a potential risk of tokenism if community involvement is superficial and does not lead to genuine influence over decisions⁸. Managing potential conflicts of interest among community grantmakers requires establishing clear guidelines and processes²⁵. As previously discussed, measuring the impact of participatory grantmaking using traditional metrics can be difficult, necessitating the adoption of more nuanced evaluation approaches¹⁸. Finally, there can sometimes be tensions between community-defined priorities and the broader strategic goals of the funding organization, requiring careful navigation and communication.

Several important lessons have been learned from the implementation of participatory grantmaking initiatives. It is crucial to start with clear intentions, having a well-defined understanding of why this approach is being adopted and what the funder hopes to achieve¹⁸. Investing time and effort in building authentic and trusting relationships with community members is invaluable⁷. Funders must be genuinely prepared to cede a significant level of control over funding decisions to community members². Recognizing that the participatory process itself can have significant positive benefits for individuals and communities, beyond just the allocation of funds, is also important²¹. Establishing continuous feedback loops and demonstrating a willingness to learn and adapt the approach over time is essential for long-term success². Finally, consistently acknowledging and valuing the unique knowledge, perspectives, and insights that community members bring to the grantmaking process is fundamental to the success and legitimacy of participatory grantmaking².

Comparative Analysis of Models and Outcomes

The following table provides a comparison of the different participatory grantmaking models identified in this report:

Model Type	Key Examples	Who Participates in Decision-Making	How Decisions are Made	Typical Goals and Intended Outcomes	Reported Outcomes or Key Learnings
Community-Led	Partnership for Better Health ² , RWJF Building Local Alignment ⁶ , Ben & Jerry's Foundation ¹⁰ , Foundation for Black Communities ¹¹ , EPA Thriving Communities ¹⁴ , Philanthropy Northwest Thriving Communities ¹⁵	Community members directly affected by the issues	Community councils defining criteria, collective review and voting, participatory budgeting	Promote equity and justice, empower communities, improve grant effectiveness and relevance, build trust	Community members can develop entire grantmaking frameworks, local intermediaries facilitate implementation, funding aligns with community priorities, applicants can directly influence funding decisions
Youth-Led	Sillerman Center Youth Philanthropy ¹² , Greater Worcester Community Foundation ¹² , Women's Foundation of Minnesota Young Women's Committee ⁹	Young people	Varies depending on the specific program	Empower youth, foster civic engagement, make grantmaking responsive to youth needs	Democratizes philanthropy, benefits young people through skill development, provides unique youth perspectives
Expert Panel	Partnership for Better Health Cohort ² , RWJF Advisory Committee ⁶ , The Tower Foundation ¹ , JustFund Council of Leaders ³ , Women's Foundation of Minnesota Committees ⁹	Individuals with specific expertise or lived experience	Varies from advisory roles to direct decision-making	Leverage specific knowledge, center lived experience, inform funding strategies	"Expert" can include lived experience, panels guide development, centers voices of impacted individuals, integrates expertise into operations
Giving Circle	Sillerman Center Giving Circles ¹	Donors who pool their resources	Collective decision-making among donors	Democratize philanthropy, engage donors in learning	Driven by collective giving and shared decision-making among donors
Flow Funding/ Onward Granting	Flow Funding example ¹⁶	Selected individual or organization	Independent decision-making by the intermediary	Decentralize grantmaking, reach specific communities	Delegates authority to trusted intermediaries
Collective Models (Closed & Open)	Fund Action, Edge Fund ¹⁶	Applicants and other stakeholders	Collective processes like voting or consensus	Shared decision-making, empower applicants	Power distributed among a wider range of stakeholders

This comparison reveals that different participatory grantmaking models offer varying levels of community involvement and are designed to achieve distinct goals in diverse contexts. Community-led models generally involve the most direct participation from those affected by the funding, aiming for deep community engagement and empowerment. Youth-led models specifically focus on empowering young people and making grantmaking more relevant to their needs. Expert panel approaches leverage the knowledge and experience of specific individuals, which can include both professional expertise and lived experience. Giving circles provide a mechanism for collective philanthropy and decision-making among donors. Flow funding allows for the decentralization of grantmaking through trusted intermediaries. Collective models emphasize shared decision-making among a broader group of stakeholders, including applicants. The choice of model depends heavily on the specific objectives of the funder, the characteristics of the community being served, and the desired degree of power sharing in the grantmaking process.

Benchmarking the CET Model: Peer Comparisons in Participatory Grantmaking

The table below summarizes how the Tower Foundation’s Community Experts Team (CET) aligns with and differs from other participatory grantmaking models across the United States. Drawing on national examples—including youth-led, community-led, and expert panel approaches—this benchmarking snapshot highlights shared practices, distinctive features, and potential opportunities to deepen CET’s design, governance, and field-level influence.

Model Type	Example	Who Makes Decisions	Key Features	How Tower CET Aligns	Opportunities for CET
Community-Led	Partnership for Better Health	Community cohort with lived experience	Local framing, full-cycle design, shared ownership	CET engages young adults with lived experience and gives them end-to-end responsibility for a \$350K fund	Could expand alumni leadership or advisory roles for sustained influence
Youth-Led	Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, Youth for Community Improvement	Youth committees (ages 16–24)	Youth design process and lead grant decisions	CET centers youth voice and equity, with stipends, supports, and autonomy	Could formalize youth governance roles (e.g., youth co-chairs, voting power codification)
Expert Panel	JustFund’s Lived Experience Council, Tower Foundation CET	Individuals with lived expertise	Expert review, program feedback, often advisory or co-decisional	CET combines lived expertise with grant decision-making and review – a potential pipeline to serve as Community Grant Consultants in the foundation	Opportunity to deepen training, storytelling, and field-building to elevate participants as sector leaders
Flow Funding / Intermediary	RWJF’s Building Local Alignment	Local organizations design participatory processes	National funder defers to localized design	Tower directly facilitates, but might borrow localized flexibility	Could explore co-facilitators or participant-designed engagement components
Collective/ Peer Model	Foundation for Black Communities	Applicants serve as peer reviewers	Democratized power, shared grant decision authority	CET has embedded collaboration, but not peer-based scoring	Could pilot peer-to-peer scoring or co-design in RFP development
Youth-Possible Philanthropy™	(Butler, 2025)	Youth as architects of systems change	Governance, strategy, field influence, equity	CET strongly aligned in spirit and practice	Opportunity to make the framework explicit and model it as a sector exemplar

Synthesis and Insights for the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation

The research conducted for this report reinforces the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation's existing commitment to participatory grantmaking, as evidenced by their Community Experts Team and Community Grant Consultants¹. The diverse range of models and practices identified across the United States provides valuable context for the Foundation to further refine its approach, particularly in the area of evaluation. The consistent emphasis on centering lived experience, the overarching commitment to equity and justice, and the evolving landscape of evaluation in participatory grantmaking are recurring themes that hold significant relevance for the Foundation's ongoing work.

For benchmarking its evaluation, the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation could consider several key recommendations. Adopting participatory evaluation approaches, where community members are actively involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation process, could provide richer and more meaningful insights. The Fund for Shared Insight's toolkit and the experiences of other foundations offer valuable resources in this area⁸. Ensuring that the evaluation framework captures outcomes that are truly meaningful to the communities being served is crucial. Methods like the Most Significant Change approach could be particularly useful in this regard²¹. Systematically documenting the Foundation's participatory grantmaking processes, including any challenges encountered, adaptations made, and lessons learned, similar to RWJF's "Participatory Grantmaking in Practice" case study, would be beneficial for internal learning and external sharing⁶. Creating opportunities for community grantmakers and grantees to collectively reflect on the impact of the participatory grantmaking initiatives can foster a deeper understanding of the outcomes and the value of the process⁸. Based on the comparative analysis of different models, the Foundation might also explore whether alternative participatory grantmaking models could be suitable for specific funding priorities or community contexts. It is essential to prioritize equity throughout the evaluation process itself, ensuring that it is culturally responsive and centers the voices of historically marginalized communities²⁹. Finally, continuously engaging with resources and networks like the Participatory Grantmaking Community and Candid's GrantCraft will help the Foundation stay informed about evolving best practices and evaluation methodologies in this dynamic field³.

As the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation considers these recommendations, several key questions for internal reflection may be helpful: What are the Foundation's primary goals for adopting participatory grantmaking? Whose perspectives—particularly those of youth with different abilities and lived experiences—are currently most prominent in the Foundation's evaluation of its participatory grantmaking efforts? How can the Foundation further empower youth and community members to shape not only the evaluation process but also the Foundation's broader learning agenda and strategy? What specific metrics or indicators would best capture the intended outcomes of the Foundation's participatory grantmaking models? And how can the Foundation ensure that its evaluation process is both equitable and generative—contributing meaningfully to participant leadership, institutional learning, and continuous improvement?

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the diverse landscape of participatory grantmaking initiatives across the United States. A variety of models are being implemented, each with its own nuances in terms of who participates in decision-making and how those decisions are made. These initiatives are driven by a shared commitment to promoting equity, empowering communities, and enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of philanthropic investments. The evaluation of participatory grantmaking is an evolving field, with a growing emphasis on community-centered approaches that prioritize learning and capture a broad range of impacts. The best practices, challenges, and lessons learned from these initiatives offer valuable guidance for organizations seeking to adopt or strengthen their participatory grantmaking efforts. The insights gained from this analysis can directly inform the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation's efforts to benchmark and strengthen its evaluation of its own participatory grantmaking practices, ultimately contributing to more equitable and impactful philanthropic outcomes.

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Appendix D.

CET Virtual Meeting Observation Tools

This appendix includes the observation tools used to document participation, equity, and power-sharing during CET virtual meetings and video reviews. These templates supported the concurrent evaluation by providing a consistent way to capture voice, agency, accessibility, and decision-making dynamics across sessions.

D.1 CET Zoom Video Observation Template

This template was used to review recorded CET Zoom sessions (e.g., April 9, 2025) and capture patterns in voice and agency, inclusion and accessibility, equity and shared decision-making, and overall impressions of participation.

Observation of April 9, 2025 CET Meeting

(Video review conducted by The L.E.A.D. Agency for evaluation purposes.)

A. General Meeting Context

Date of Meeting: April 9, 2025

Meeting Duration: 1 hour

Primary Facilitator(s):

Notetaker(s) for This Observation: Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler

Number of Participants Observed:

B. Observation Focus Areas

1. Voice and Agency

Who speaks, and how often?

(Track repeated speakers, new voices, and participation distribution.)

✓ Many different voices shared input ✓ Only a few voices dominated ✓ Facilitator actively rotated or invited multiple speakers ✓ Participants self-initiated sharing without prompting

Examples/Notes:

2. Inclusion and Accessibility

Are multiple voices invited and supported?

(Look for explicit efforts to invite quieter participants, or make space.)

✓ Facilitator used inclusive prompts (“Would someone who hasn’t spoken like to share?”)
✓ Chat participation encouraged ✓ Visual, auditory, or language supports visible (captions, interpreter, etc.)

Are support structures visible (tech, emotional, translation, accessibility)?

✓ Tech issues addressed supportively ✓ Emotional support acknowledged (e.g., facilitator checking on well-being) ✓ Accessibility features (e.g., captions) in use

Notes: _____

3. Equity and Shared Decision-Making

Are decisions shared or pre-set?

(Analyze decision points or how priorities were set.)

✓ Decision points discussed with full group ✓ Participants’ ideas visibly shaped decision outcomes
✓ Staff dominated decision-making ✓ Some decisions appeared already finalized without participant input

Notes: _____

C. Additional Observation Notes

Strengths Observed:

Challenges or Growth Opportunities:

Emerging Questions or Insights:

D. Overall Preliminary Impressions

Voice & Agency:

Inclusion:

Equity & Participation:

D.2 Community Experts Team (CET) Evaluation: Virtual Meeting Observation Form

This form was used for real-time observation of CET virtual meetings, focusing on voice and participation, influence and decision-making power, support and accessibility, responsiveness to participant input, and overall reflections on participation strength and opportunities for growth.

For Observing Participation in Live Zoom Sessions

Instructions: Use this form to observe and document how participation shows up during live virtual meetings (e.g., Zoom sessions).

PROMPT: Track who speaks, how participants are engaged, how decisions are shared, and whether accessibility and support structures are visible.

Meeting Observed:

Date:

Reviewer Name:

Total Number of Participants:

Facilitators/Staff Present:

Voice and Participation

PROMPT: Look for how participants are invited to share.

Were open-ended questions used to invite participant input? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

How many different participants spoke during the session?

Were there active encouragements to hear from quieter voices?

(e.g., "Anyone who hasn't spoken yet?") (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Methods Used for Engagement:

Influence and Decision-Making Power

PROMPT: Look for how participants shape decisions in real-time.

Were participants asked to help shape decisions or priorities? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Were any votes, consensus activities, or participant-led decisions observed? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Examples of participant influence on the meeting outcome:

Support and Accessibility

PROMPT: Look for accommodations or supports provided.

Accessibility Features Observed:

Were participants reminded about stipends, supports, or accommodations during the meeting? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Responsiveness to Participant Input

PROMPT: Look for adjustments or real-time changes based on participant feedback.

Did facilitators adjust timing, agenda, or discussions based on participant needs or feedback? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Were participant concerns or suggestions visibly acknowledged and addressed? (Yes/No)

Notes: _____

Overall Reflections

Overall Participation Strength: (High / Medium / Low)

Highlights of Effective Participation:

Opportunities for Strengthening Future Meetings:

Thank you for your observation! Your insights help ensure that CET nurtures authentic, equitable participation throughout its journey.



Prepared by The L.E.A.D. Agency
Dr. Kimberlin D. Butler, Founder & Chief Possibility Catalyst
December 2025

