Community Strategies Group

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WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL

CASE STUDY 1



Broadening Authentic Leadership: Student Action with Farmworkers

THE ISSUE: EQUITABLE, ACTION-ABLE LEADERSHIP

What does it mean for those most affected by an organization's work to exercise authentic power and leadership in the organization? How can a rural-serving organization effectively welcome and truly empower leaders from all backgrounds, including those who have not formally exercised leadership in a similar context or previously been involved in directing an organization?

These questions have been at the forefront in recent years for organizations across rural and Native nation communities as they seek to address systemic inequities that persist in organizational structures and leadership participation. In many cases, organizations wrestling with these issues have faced challenges: it may, at first, seem simple to invite new members from marginalized communities to serve on existing boards and committees; but if these new members do not have the tools and space they need to exercise real power, their inclusion is, at best, ineffective, and, at worst, tokenizing and damaging. Stating a commitment to equitable, actionable leadership or simply having representation is not the same as putting that commitment into action.

THE SPOTLIGHT: STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF) is a North Carolina–based nonprofit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change. SAF, founded in 1992 by a small group of faculty and students at Duke University, has grown into a national organization with five flagship programs that reach thousands of students and farmworkers every year.

SAF's commitment to equitable, actionable leadership runs deep. Farmworkers, especially migrant farmworkers, have historically been marginalized and denied a voice in the rural communities where they live and work. SAF is dedicated to supporting farmworkers as they advocate for themselves in their communities and beyond. Bringing together groups with very different levels of cultural power—farmworkers and university students from both farmworker and non-farmworker backgrounds—has necessitated a conscious, reflective approach to avoid "saviorism" and build authentic rural power and voice.

In 2012, as part of a strategic planning and reflection process around the organization's 20-year anniversary, SAF set out to ensure that all of the organization's constituents—especially those with experience as farmworkers and students and alumni from farmworker families—were well-represented on the board of directors. Knowing this work would take time and dedication, SAF's leadership committed to a responsive process based on listening to constituents and revising practices together. The practices profiled in this case study emerged from this process over the past decade.

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THE PRACTICE: INCLUSIVE BOARD DEVELOPMENT

SAF's board development work is grounded in four specific practices that, together, are intended to create an inclusive body in which all members can bring their authentic selves and experiences to leadership. The impact of these practices on the organization has been palpable in recent years, as the board has led the organization to prioritize people from a farmworker background in all programs, increase student stipends, and create a farmworker emergency fund during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1 VALUE WHAT EVERYONE BRINGS: BOARD MATRIX

SAF uses a "board matrix" to clearly delineate the types of experience and expertise that the organization needs on the board, including farmworker experience, experience as a participant in SAF programs, certain types of legal expertise, and expertise in health issues, among others. These priorities guide the board recruitment process, which has a special focus on program alumni from farmworker backgrounds. The matrix, associated materials, and the way it is used by staff and board members, makes it clear that all of these types of expertise and experience are equally valued, regardless of the different values that the larger society may assign to them. Each board member—whether a student, farmworker, lawyer, or doctor—is regarded as an expert with essential knowledge for the leadership of the organization.

2 SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES: SKILLSHARING AND TRAINING

Building on the principle that every board member has knowledge and experience that is valuable to the group, all members are invited to share their knowledge with their peers. This practice is rooted in a popular education framework, which SAF employs across its programs. Each meeting of the SAF board includes a skillshare or training led by a member of the organization's board or staff, or an outside presenter if necessary; the board chooses topics together based on what they would like to know and what they would like to share. Topics—from current conditions for farmworkers in the field to how to read a balance sheet—are accorded equal weight and value. Each time a new member joins the board, the board leadership and staff take time to learn about the knowledge they bring to the group, as well as what new knowledge they feel would help them be a stronger board member.



SAF Executive Director, Sylvia Zapata Shoemaker:
"Sharing stories, resources, and skills is key to our work. It's the only way we can all work together towards our mission. We're all bringing something to the movement, and we can't do it without each other."

3 SUPPORT EACH OTHER: BOARD BUDDIES

Each new SAF board member is paired with an experienced board member or a staff member in a "board buddy" system that builds relationships within the group, helps new members learn how the board works, and allows new members an extra way to ask questions and provide feedback on board processes. One-on-one interactions allow for a different type of learning that may be more accessible to those who are less comfortable speaking up in groups or less familiar with nonprofit organizations and boards of directors.

4 FOSTER AN ATMOSPHERE OF CONVIVIALITY: SHARING ACTIVITIES AND STORIES

SAF intentionally works to create a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere for board meetings, including, before the advent of virtual meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic, sharing meals, cooking and cleaning up together, and participating in recreational activities like dancing. Taking the time to do these activities together builds trust and makes it more likely that all board members will fully participate in the more formal parts of the meetings. To continue this practice in the virtual context, the group has used music to set the atmosphere for meetings, provided gift cards to cover food remotely, and used breakout rooms to allow board members to get to know each other better. The board also begins every meeting with a personal check in, to allow everyone to bring their full selves to the virtual table.

TIPS FOR PUTTING THE PRACTICE TO WORK

SAF offers the following tips to other organizations seeking to undertake this work:

- Know that this work is for everyone. All board members benefit from inclusive systems. If you come to this work assuming it is only for the benefit of those members with less experience on nonprofit boards, you will perpetuate inequity.
- Take the time, make the investment. This work takes real time and commitment on everyone's part. If you try to undertake it "around the edges" without making space for it, you will not succeed.
- Ask for feedback—and act on it. Don't assume that members will come to you with questions or suggestions. Regularly and proactively solicit feedback from board members, and reflect and act on that feedback.
- Know that you can start small. You don't have to do everything at once—start with one practice, like the board buddy system, and see how it goes. Momentum builds from action.

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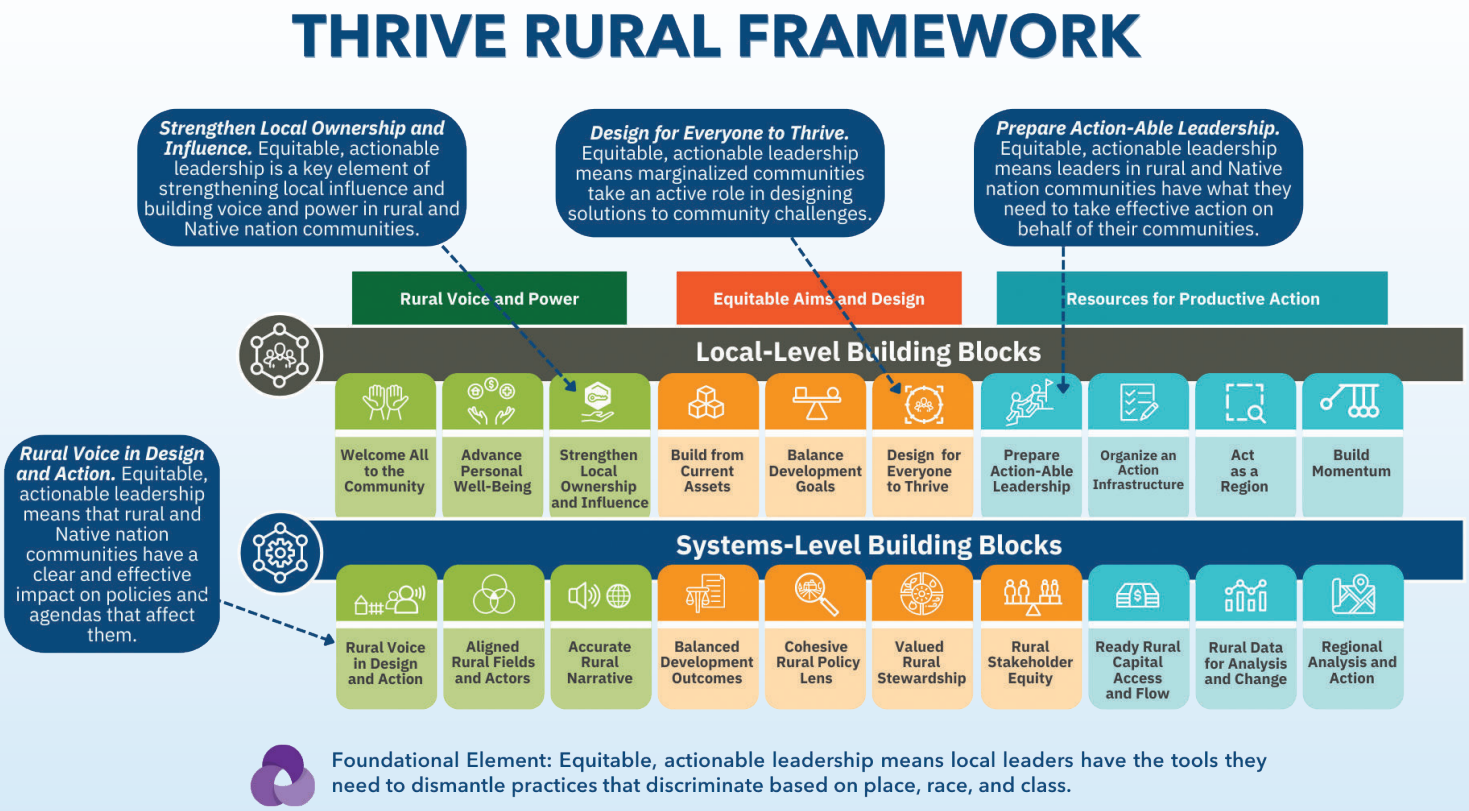
EQUITABLE, ACTION-ABLE LEADERSHIP IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



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Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field.

The foundation of our work is the Thrive Rural Framework — a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

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