THE GEN NOW FELLOWSHIP
NARRATIVE CAPACITY BUILDING IN A TIME OF CRISIS
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INTRODUCTION

Effective communications strategies are critical for any public information or civic engagement campaign. In 2020, however, they became crucially important, particularly in the low-income communities of color that were most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and racial unrest. The training offered through the Gen Now Fellowship (GNF) enabled partner organizations to develop and implement communications strategies in a period when outreach to communities and constituents was vitally important.

GNF (initially called the New Majority Fellowship) was launched in October 2019 by Power California, a network of nine youth-based organizations that seek to educate and mobilize eligible young voters in low-income communities and communities of color, and its partner ReFrame, a national nonprofit dedicated to building the narrative power of social justice organizations. The goal of the program was to bolster the communications capabilities of the nine partner organizations so that they could more effectively reach their young constituents.

Each of the organizations nominated a staff person to participate as a fellow in the fourteen-month program. The training that the fellows received proved to be invaluable as the participating organizations worked to keep their racially diverse and low-income communities healthy, informed, and civically engaged throughout 2020, a time of unprecedented turbulence.

This report evaluates the impact of GNF and demonstrates the varying ways in which the fellows developed their communication talents and skills. The findings reported here draw primarily on longitudinal surveys completed by the fellows. This report offers overwhelming evidence that GNF significantly increased the abilities of the fellows to lead and implement communications strategies that were tailored to their organizations and their communities. Accordingly, GNF contributed to the efforts of Power California and its affiliated partners to shape public narratives during the 2020 election cycle.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The young organizers who were nominated for GNF worked in organizations that were located in communities across a large part of California, from Oakland to Orange County. The fellows were mostly of color, with five identifying as Latinx, two as Asian American or Pacific Islander, one as Black, and one as White. Five identified as male and four as female, with three also identifying as queer. Each was supervised by a staff member in the fellow’s organization.

The fellows participated in weekly training sessions that were conducted by staff from Power California or ReFrame or by a third-party consultant. The training comprised workshops, some of which included panel
presentations; guided group discussions and strategy sessions; small-group coaching sessions; and skill-building activities. Largely conducted via Zoom, the sessions were geared toward equipping fellows with the tools that would enable them not only to develop an effective communications strategy but also to share their learning with others in their organizations, especially young members.

In the strategy sessions, which occurred twice a month, fellows worked collaboratively with Power California staff to develop a coordinated communications strategy that would be shared by the nine organizations. At the same time, fellows were learning skills that increased each organization’s capacity to develop its own set of strategies. At the heart of the strategy sessions were narratives about social justice and community investment that were shared across the partner organizations and could be amplified across the state.

The strategies that were developed gave Power California and its partner organizations the opportunity to collectively and creatively respond to the multiple crises of 2020, when the importance of effective digital media communication reached an all-time high. The fellowship at the heart of GNF was an important resource during this period, as each organization sought to fulfill its mission, whether that was to keep its community healthy, support movements for racial justice, contribute to mutual aid efforts, and/or mobilize voters.

**EVALUATION DESIGN**

The evaluation of GNF was conducted primarily through surveys administered to each of the GNF fellows. Surveys designed to measure fellows’ growth over the course of the program were completed at three points: before the program began in October 2019, midway through the program, in May 2020, and upon its conclusion in November 2020. Fellows were asked to rate their understanding of what they gained from the program, choosing from “no understanding” or “moderate,” “strong,” or “expert” understanding. Additional surveys assessed the relative helpfulness of individual sessions offered during the program. Fellows were asked to evaluate the extent to which these aided their professional development by responding “very helpful,” “somewhat helpful,” a “little helpful,” or “not at all helpful.” When respondents missed a session because it was optional or they were unavailable to participate, they were asked to indicate that the question was “not applicable.” Data for sessions that occurred in the first half of the program were collected at the midpoint; data for those in the second half were collected at the end of the program.

The surveys completed by the fellows were complemented by surveys administered to the supervisors who oversaw the fellows’ work. Observations made during informal discussions, which followed most sessions
and were led by a GNF staff member, offered additional information. Evaluation staff attended at least one of these gatherings each month, and their notes supplement the survey findings.

**FINDINGS**

**FELLOWS’ ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM COMPONENTS**

Figure 1 shows fellows’ assessment of a selection of sessions offered over the course of the program. Rows two through five list sessions offered during the first half of the program, and rows six through ten list sessions offered during the program’s second half. Small-group coaching was offered throughout the program. Overall, fellows overwhelmingly found these sessions to be “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful.”

Small-group coaching was a key component of the program. During these monthly sessions, groups of three or four fellows met with an experienced GNF staff member. Fellows were able to connect with one another on a personal level, share their progress, and collectively troubleshoot issues. The evaluation team noted that during informal discussions, fellows spoke highly of these coaching sessions and said that they looked forward to them. One fellow called it “work therapy.” Beyond that, many fellows viewed these sessions as critical to their professional growth during the program. These observations are reflected in survey findings. As seen in figure 1, eight of nine fellows, 89 percent, reported that small-group coaching was “very helpful.”

In another key session offered early in the program, fellows read and discussed case studies that described how organizations had reframed a given story or event to give it a community-based focus that had engaged their constituents. The evaluation team noted that during informal discussions, fellows said that this training was inspirational because it set the stage for their work
throughout the year. This observation was supported by survey data, with all attendees finding the session “very helpful.”

Another early session, “Crisis as Opportunity and Rapid Response,” emphasized the importance of understanding crises as opportunities to shift and advance narratives. As they worked on long-term narrative strategies, fellows learned the importance of preparing to respond promptly to high-profile, challenging conditions or events, whether anticipated or unanticipated, like the pandemic. Fellows saw how crises can create opportunities for enhancing awareness of an organization’s goals, promoting solidarity, and building community. Once again, fellows overwhelmingly found this session, which prepared fellows for the tumult and pain of 2020, to be “very helpful.”

GNF fellows also participated in a lively workshop focused on writing op-eds and letters to the editor. During informal discussions, fellows agreed that when drafting commentary for public dissemination, they should strategically center young people’s voices, argue forcefully for accessible elections, and highlight the importance of voting down-ballot. Fellows also discussed how to incorporate information about the effects of Covid-19 and the current social climate in their op-eds and letters. Survey findings showed that 78 percent of fellows found this training “very helpful,” with the remaining finding it “somewhat helpful.” Several fellows eventually published an op-ed or a commentary that originated in this session.

In another session in the first half of the program, fellows received initial training on how to help young spokespeople work effectively with the media. Just over half of the fellows found this session “very helpful,” and another third found it “somewhat helpful.”

The fellows honed their communications skills through an email-writing workshop, which focused on deploying effective and persuasive communications strategies via email blasts. Seventy-eight percent of fellows reported the tips they received were “very helpful,” and 22 percent reported that they were “somewhat helpful.” While this session was highly rated, some fellows commented during informal discussions that they did not have the opportunity to utilize this skill within their organization.

Only six out of nine fellows were available to attend the “Imposter Syndrome” workshop, which was aimed at boosting the confidence of the fellows, who were largely first-generation organizers of color. All who did attend found this session “very helpful.” A panel discussion titled “Power of Storytelling” drove home the importance of crafting a creative and compelling story, and 78 percent reported that this session was “very helpful.” “Messaging Our Movement” taught fellows how to frame a story to best capture the core values of the organization. While this workshop was less interactive than others, 56 percent of fellows found it “very helpful,” and 33 percent found it “somewhat helpful.”
Finally, figure 1 shows fellows’ assessment of an optional session on handling interactions with the media. The goal was to prepare fellows to train their young members on techniques for staying on message when working with the media. All six of the fellows who attended found this training helpful.

Because creating an effective communications strategy depends to large extent on dissemination, fellows engaged throughout the program in strategy discussions on how to use multiple digital media platforms to advance their campaigns. As shown in figure 2, the response to these discussions ranged from “very helpful,” at 56 percent, to “a little helpful,” at 11 percent, with another 11 percent indicating that these sessions were “not applicable.”

Fellows were given tips on how to train other staff within their organizations to handle media effectively and to support young members as they become outspoken voters, or “truth tellers.” These discussions also allowed fellows to review their organization’s plans for media pitches. While only 44 percent of fellows found this guidance “very helpful” and 33 percent found it “somewhat helpful,” most fellows noted during informal discussions that they were able to transfer the knowledge they learned to peers at their organization.

Several sessions presented activities designed to build specific skills. For example, fellows learned how to plan a media calendar, which organizations can employ to prioritize and properly time their communications. A majority of fellows, 56 percent, responded that this session was “very helpful.”

As part of the program, fellows participated in workshops on producing different forms of digital media content. These sessions included training in graphic design, video production, and creating memes. Fellows’ overall assessment of these sessions varied significantly,
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and, compared with other sessions, fewer found them to be “very helpful.”

In related sessions, GNF staff and fellows devoted a few weeks to developing digital media toolkits that the partner organizations could use to educate voters about the November 2020 election. This required significant teamwork among the fellows, who created original digital content for multiple platforms that could be shared across the organizations. A majority, 56 percent, found this labor-intensive project to be “very helpful,” while the rest found it “somewhat helpful.”

Toward the end of the program, members participated in a guided discussion that explicitly outlined the difference between 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations. Because the political activities of the former are restricted, an organization’s 501 status will affect its communications strategy. This discussion was requested by the fellows. All fellows reported that this sessions was “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful.” During informal discussions, some fellows said that they would have appreciated this discussion earlier in the program.

Fellows developed shared digital content and disseminated it across their social media channels. social media images here

**Fellows’ Assessment of the Program Overall**

Fellows were asked to assess the overall helpfulness of the GNF program for their communications work. Figure 3 shows that a majority indicated that the program was “very helpful” in increasing their confidence in developing and implementing a shared communications strategy, while the remaining fellows said it was “somewhat helpful.” Meanwhile, all agreed that the program was “very helpful” in preparing them to develop and implement a communications plan.

A majority also reported that the program was “very helpful” for their campaign messaging skills, and the remaining fellows thought that the program was “somewhat helpful” in this respect. These survey findings speak to the program’s relevance for the career development of young communications strategists. Meanwhile, observations made by the evaluation team over the course of the program evidence how the coaching sessions, discussions, workshops, and other
activities spurred fellows to develop and implement shared narrative strategies that prioritized racial justice, government investment in their communities, health, and young voices.

**Fellows’ Assessment of Their Knowledge and Expertise**

Our research sought to capture whether fellows’ perception of their expertise changed over the course of the program. To this end, we surveyed them at the beginning, the midpoint, and the end of the program. We asked them to rate their overall level of understanding of and expertise in the development and implementation of communications campaign strategies as well as their understanding of and expertise in specific components. Fellows could indicate “no understanding,” “moderate understanding,” “strong understanding,” or “expert understanding.”

As shown in figure 4, fellows’ growth in media strategy development was incremental in the first half of the program. The 22 percent of fellows reporting a “strong understanding” at the beginning of the program had increased to only 33 percent midway through. By the program’s end, 67 percent of fellows reported a “strong understanding” and 22 percent indicated that they were experts. Evidence of this growth was corroborated at the closing convening, where fellows articulated how the program had enhanced their ability to execute a media strategy.

Figure 5 demonstrates the growth in fellows’ understanding of different aspects of campaign development. Survey results indicate that by the middle of the program, fellows thought that their ability to conduct issue and media research had not changed. At the end of program, after fellows had applied their research skills as they worked on election campaigns, all reported growth in their expertise, with 56 percent indicating that they had a “strong understanding” and 22 percent indicating an “expert understanding.” Fellows also reported growth in their understanding of framing and narrative, narrative analysis, and evaluation and analytics. These self-assessments show that GNF increased the ability of novice communications leaders to develop and lead campaigns.
Fellows were also asked to rate their understanding of communications tactics. These results are shown in figure 6. Interestingly, the percentage of fellows who considered themselves experts declined between the pre-test and the midpoint assessment, likely because they recognized that they still had room for growth after participating in training and receiving feedback on their work. By the end of the program, however, the percentage of fellows who felt that they had an “expert understanding” of media tactics had grown in each category: digital media, earned media coverage, rapidly response to opportunities, op-ed writing, and content production.

**SUPERVISORS’ ASSESSMENT OF FELLOWS’ GROWTH**

At the conclusion of the program, the supervisor at each of the partner organizations was also surveyed. Supervisors were asked to assess how much fellows had improved in regard to developing and implementing a communications strategy that expanded the organization’s ability to reach its constituents. In eight of the nine organizations, the same supervisor remained in the organization throughout the program period. In the ninth case, the supervisor had assumed her role after the program had begun, so she could not adequately assess the growth of her fellow in each of the survey’s categories. This increased the percentage of “I don’t know” responses.

In general, supervisors observed “somewhat” or “a lot” of growth in fellows’ ability to carry out different aspects of strategic communications, as figure 7 shows. The most growth was seen in creating and implementing a social media toolkit, with 67 percent of supervisors reporting “a lot” of growth and the remaining reporting that fellows grew “somewhat.” A majority also reported that fellows grew “a lot” when it came to messaging and narrative framing, as well as developing pitches for earned media coverage. Although only a relatively low percentage of supervisors felt that fellows became more skilled in writing effective e-blasts, not all fellows had the opportunity to practice this skill.

In a final question, supervisors were asked to assess fellows’ overall growth during the fellowship period.
The results are shown in figure 8. In terms of driving and implementing communications strategy, 44 percent of supervisors reported that fellows had grown “a lot,” with 22 percent reporting that they had grown “somewhat,” and 33 percent reporting that they had experienced “a little bit” of growth. Supervisors were then asked to assess fellows’ leadership growth. Here, a majority reported “a lot” of growth, while 33 percent reported that their fellow had grown “somewhat” and 11 percent that they had grown “a little bit.” Overall, GNF expanded participants’ capacities to play a leadership role and confront head-on the tragedy and anger that young people experienced as a result of the widespread illness, social isolation, and racial unrest of 2020. At the closing convening, an overwhelming number of supervisors noted that the fellowship was timely and that it had strengthened their organization’s digital outreach strategy in the wake of the 2020 pandemic. In fact, six of the nine supervisors reported that the communications team at their organization had expanded, an effort that was facilitated by the growth that fellows experienced in the program.
CONCLUSION

The launch of GNF in October 2019, just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, could not have been more timely. The program’s weekly gatherings provided opportunities for concrete skill building, assessment, reflection, and strategizing, and the digital media communications strategies that the young organizers developed enabled them to reach their constituents during a particularly challenging year. Survey data, as well as our participant observations, indicate that the program led to measurable gains in the capacities of young leaders and their organizations to keep young voters informed and motivated in a culturally and politically volatile landscape. Importantly, the communications strategy that was collectively developed and implemented during the course of the program bolstered youth-led civic engagement campaigns, disseminated valuable health and safety updates, and articulated calls for racial justice during the 2020 summer uprisings.

This evaluation demonstrates the importance of offering young organizers of color ongoing training in and space to collaboratively develop communication strategies. Youth organizations, especially those serving the most marginalized communities, rarely have the capacity to develop an effective communications strategy. The fourteen-month Gen Now Fellowship program expanded the knowledge and skills of its young participants as they crafted communications strategies that helped their organizations support community members through multiple crises. The multifaceted fellowship enhanced learning across the partner organizations and amplified shared narratives that linked the concerns of communities across California to the importance of voting. Moving forward, the training provided by the program may be replicated or adapted to address an ever-evolving media landscape. Given the prevalence of media disinformation, the work of Power California, its community partners, and similar organizations has become even more critical for ensuring that low-income communities of color remain civically engaged and properly informed about current events that impact their well-being.

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4): A “C3” organization is exempt from federal income tax and can take donations that are tax deductible for donors, while a “C4” organization cannot. However, a C4 organization has fewer restrictions than a C3 organization, which is typically restricted from lobbying and forbidden from campaign activities for or against political candidates. A C4 organization has more freedom to endorse candidates or propositions.

Strategic communications: Social conditions have created a need for communications practices that will improve civic education for young people. An
understanding of strategic communications enabled fellows to take advantage of the excitement around large social events by talking about issues important to youth.

**Media strategy:** The fellows created strategies for developing and distributing social media content—memes, infographics, and videos—that aligned with their narrative priorities. Elements of these strategies included creating a calendar, a storybank, and memes and infographics and implementing shared messaging.

**Campaign development:** The process of maintaining consistent brand messaging across numerous marketing channels, including traditional and digital media.

**Communications tactics:** Tactics that improve engagement with and the results of an organization’s internal messaging.

**GNF tactics:** Communications tactics that are specific to the structure of the GNF program.

**Rapid response:** Communication made through the media during a large social event. The communication may be planned or unplanned.

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