

Building Capacity to Increase Health Promotion Funding to American Indian Communities: Recommendations From Community Members

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Foundations and government agencies have historically played a critical role in supporting community-based health promotion programs. Increased access to health promotion funding may help address significant health issues existing within American Indian (AI) communities, such as childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Understanding the capacity of AI communities to successfully apply for and receive funding may serve to increase resources for health promotion efforts within AI communities in Montana. This exploratory qualitative study completed 17 semistructured interviews across three AI reservations in the state of Montana. Dimensions of community capacity within the context of the funding application process and partnership with funding agencies were identified, including resources, leadership, community need, networks, and relationship with the funding agency. Dimensions of AI community capacity were then used to suggest capacity-building strategies for improved partnership between AI communities in Montana and the funding agencies.

Keywords: *American Indian; community capacity; grants; health*

► **INTRODUCTION**

Foundations and government agencies have historically played a critical role in supporting community-based health promotion programs (Easterling,

Gallagher, & Lodwick, 2003). Increases in public health funding have been correlated with decreases in deaths from preventable disease. Health gains, including a decrease in deaths from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, were larger when funding was targeted at communities with high poverty levels and low socioeconomic status versus targeting at affluent communities (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013). Despite the potential benefits public health funding may generate in American Indian (AI) communities, AI reservation communities in Montana, which are low income and experience health disparities (Dabelea et al., 2007; Ockert, n.d.; Styne, 2010), are less likely than non-AI communities to successfully apply for some types of available funding (T. Lonsdale, personal communication, April 1, 2011).

This study sought recommendations for building capacity to increase health promotion funding in three AI reservations in Montana from the view of community members who work with grant-funded projects. The study was instigated by a state-based agency that disperses federal funds for community health projects. This agency was interested in learning how they could increase the number of grant proposals to their agency from AI communities. Study findings provide research-to-practice links by suggesting best practice strategies for improving capacity in AI communities to successfully apply for and receive grant funding. Our findings

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Health Promotion Practice

November 2016 Vol. 17, No. (6) 907–914

DOI: 10.1177/1524839915622195

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also advocate for funding agencies to implement policies that enable capacity building for AI communities.

► BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

This issue was approached through the perspective of community capacity, which is the “characteristics of communities that affect their ability to identify, mobilize, and address social and public health problems” (Goodman et al., 1998, p. 259). Salsberg et al. (2007) described community capacity as encompassing both objective and environmental components. Objective capacity refers to community members’ tools, skills, and knowledge, while environmental capacity refers to the fostering and maintenance of infrastructures and environments in which the objective features can develop.

Community capacity dimensions defined within dominant culture may not be appropriate for AI communities, as indigenous capacities, such as culture, language, ceremonies, and traditions, may be missing (Edwards, Seaman, Drews, & Edwards, 1995). Studies defining dimensions of AI community capacity are few. Oetzel et al. (2011) identified dimensions of youth, elders, sense of community, culture, and communication across two tribal nations in the Southwest United States. Baezconde-Garbanati, Beebe, and Perez-Stable (2007) described capacity dimensions for an Oklahoma tribal community as sense of community, leadership, and community collaboration.

Increasing funding capacity in AI communities encompasses the community and the funding agency. To our knowledge, there are no reports in the literature addressing funding agency capacity for engaging communities around health promotion funding. General organizational capacity has been described as the adequacy of inputs, such as knowledge, financial resources, trained personnel, and well-managed strategic partnerships, necessary to carry out a program and achieve desired outcomes (Cassidy, Leviton, & Hunter, 2006). Others have identified domains of organizational competency as governance, management, group process, negotiation, knowledge, exchange, change agency, sharing of power, and organizational skills and structures (Hawe, King, Noort, Jordens, & Lloyd, 2000; Masuda, Creighton, Nixon, & Frankish, 2011). Collectively, these dimensions parallel several elements of community capacity and could be developed to meet community or organizational goals. There are few organizations offering funding application programs tailored to AI community needs. Of those available, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.) provides a comprehensive “Tribal Training and Technical Assistance Center,” which

focuses on infrastructure development and capacity building for tribes. The Health Resources and Services Administration provides a webinar for AI communities interested in applying for funding, while the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2013) offers funding opportunities for low-income communities but no specific programs for AI community application assistance. Identification of specific dimensions of capacity for AI communities in Montana that reflect local, cultural, and historical context may provide a starting point for improving capacity in AI communities, which could lead to increased funding for health promotion efforts.

Grounded theory guided the way we collected and analyzed the data for our study; it was employed as a means to generate theories directly from the data, which is appropriate for this exploratory small-scale study focused on providing a pragmatic approach to addressing community needs (Denscombe, 2010). The socioecological model provided orientation for the development of our interview questions, as capacity is present across the spectrum of the socioecological model of community, from intrapersonal to public policy levels (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988).

► METHODS

This study used a participatory research process to engage community members in three Montana AI reservations. The reservations are 25 to 75 miles from the nearest off-reservation city of 50,000 residents. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that the reservations, respectively, had 26,172, 2,676, and 10,321 residents who were 27%, 96%, and 62% AI (Ockert, n.d.). The reservations varied in unemployment rates (~8%, 28%, and 18%), poverty levels (~16%, 38%, and 30%), and per capita income (\$14,503, \$7,326, \$10,691; Ockert, n.d.).

A semistructured interview guide was developed with community members and was based on existing literature, the socioecological model, and core assumptions of community capacity. The interview guide included 40 open-ended questions to assess levels of influence according to the socioecological model. Basic steps in the funding application process were used as domains (see Table 1). Specific questions were developed to tie funding process domains to the socioecological model, and to address both objective and environmental components of capacity. Because this was an exploratory study, questions were open-ended in order to allow participants to candidly share their thoughts and opinions. This also allowed for gathering data that would enable comparisons from prior capacity-focused research. The guide was piloted with four AIs, each of whom had substantial experience with grant-funded projects and grant writing.

TABLE 1
Interview Instrument Domains, Socioecological Level Addressed, Example Question, and Number of Questions

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Socioecological Level</i>	<i>Example Question</i>	<i>No. of Questions</i>
How people find out about funding opportunities	Individual, social	How do you find out about funding opportunities?	4
Motivation or influences on the decision to apply for a particular funding opportunity	Individual, social, organizational, community, environmental	How does receiving or not receiving help from the funding agency in the application process affect the decision to apply for funds? This is sometimes called technical assistance for writing the grant.	25
Tribal communities and funding agencies learning about one another	Organizational, community	What changes need to occur for tribal communities and funding agencies to form better working relationships?	6
Resources and skills beneficial for you or others in your community when applying for funds	Individual, organizational, community, environmental	What resources do you or others in your community currently have that help you apply for funds?	5

Review of the guide ensured cultural appropriateness and question clarity. Example questions included the following: “How do you find out about funding opportunities?” “How does the program’s ability to continue services after the funding ends affect the decision to apply for funding?” and “What should funding agencies know about tribal communities?”

Appropriate institutional review board and community approvals were gathered. We conducted interviews with 17 individuals on the reservations from September 2011 to January 2012. We used purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit AI reservation community members who work with grant-funded programs. In purposive sampling, individuals are handpicked to be participants because they have certain characteristics (e.g., experience in writing grants and working with grant-funded programs) that are believed to make them good sources of information. The sample was initiated through preexisting relationships and expanded using snowball sampling. Seventy percent ($n = 12$) of the participants self-identified as AI, 18% ($n = 3$) identified as White, and 12% ($n = 2$) identified as both AI and White. All participants had completed some college; 5 had college degrees, and 10 had graduate degrees. Six interviews were conducted on two of the reservations, five interviews on the third reservation. Participants were grant writers; health program and diabetes specialists; health, economic, transportation, and recreation planners; school board members; school instructors; and administrators.

Interviews were audio recorded and ranged in length from 35 to 136 minutes. One of the interviews was not recorded due to technical problems. Participants received a \$20 gift card at the end of the interview.

Audio recordings were transcribed using a naturalized approach, where the real language of the interview is literally transcribed (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). We constructed coding categories based on the inductive methods of grounded theory (Patton, 2002) with the aid of a qualitative analysis software program (QSR International, 2008). To construct the initial coding scheme, all transcripts were independently reviewed and a list of emergent themes created. We then triangulated the results of the separate coding to establish intersubjective criteria for coding. Redundancies and semantic equivalencies were eliminated through consensus. A random selection of 10% of the interviews were coded and compared using Cohen’s kappa statistic, which was 0.85, indicating sufficient agreement in coding (Cohen, 1960; Landis & Koch, 1977). We then employed second cycle coding, using standard qualitative data analysis methods of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods (Saladana, 2008).

► RESULTS

The primary aim of this study was to identify dimensions of AI community capacity in relation to the funding application process. Data indicated five distinct

TABLE 2
Dimensions and Themes for Tribal Community Capacity in Relation to the Funding Application Process

<i>Dimensions of Capacity</i>	<i>Community Leadership</i>	<i>Community Need</i>	<i>Networks</i>	<i>Relationship With Funding Agency</i>	<i>Resources</i>
Main themes identified within each capacity dimension	Directives from leadership Community participation Social-political climate	Actual needs Community values Sustainability of funding	Formal networks Informal networks	Past success with funding agency Technical assistance AI communities and funding agencies learning about one another	Human resources Material resources

dimensions of AI community capacity: (1) community leadership, (2) community need, (3) networks, (4) relationship with funding agency, and (5) resources. Contextual themes were revealed within each dimension (Table 2).

Community Leadership

This dimension included directives from leadership in AI communities, community participation, and the sociopolitical environment of a community. The funding application process was highly influenced by directives from leadership, such as the tribal council or county elected officials. These directives affect prioritization of funding opportunities, which in turn affects grant writers across all sectors of community. In the words of two participants, “It depends on the county commissioners and where they put their priorities” and “I always have to defer to either tribal leadership or organizational leadership, to tell me.” Leadership directives could positively influence the decision to apply, and participants emphasized the importance of informed directives from leadership, such as directives based on needs expressed by community members.

A lack of community participation in expressing needs or preferences of funding prioritization was presented as a barrier that prevented the community from applying for funding opportunities. Increased participation by AI community members in providing input to community leadership may serve to improve the alignment of actual community needs with the directives from leadership.

That’s a big need here. We need more community input on what grants to go after. I know some programs that try public meetings to get their thoughts on what we should be going after, but there’s no participation.

The social-political climate affected directives from leadership and community participation in the funding application process. This theme pointed to a “crisis-oriented” mentality with regard to fund seeking:

Because what happens up here in [community name] is, we’re so crisis-oriented, you know. When there’s a rash of [specific community crisis] then the powers that be, the tribal council will say, hey you grant writers, get us some more funding for (community crisis) prevention. So we have to drop that and go look after [community crisis] prevention.

Other elements affecting the sociopolitical climate included outspoken “naysayers” in the community, environmental emergencies such as flooding, and unexpected deaths within the community. These elements affect the time and focus dedicated to the funding application process.

If it takes so much resources and so much time and commitment that it makes it very difficult to do? Then we’re not gonna . . . do it. It’s just overwhelming enough just to get through life here, in general. It’s, it’s a rough, tough area.

Community Need

The necessity for community leaders and grant writers to have an accurate understanding of community need was a dimension mentioned frequently, and included themes of actual needs, community values, and sustainability. Participants stated that while regional and national statistics imply attention be given to specific health or social issues, attention must also be given to priorities voiced by community members for actual community needs and how to address them.

Regarding community values, participants stated they would be more likely to apply for a funding opportunity that was in line with local values. Preserving cultural traditions, such as language and cultural practices; upholding principles of sovereignty; and supporting valued populations, such as veterans, elders, or youth, were the most common values incorporated into the decision-making process for grant writers.

Participants also addressed the need for funding sustainability to support programs and employment in the community. Given the rural locations and low-resource circumstance of many AI communities, there are typically few programs addressing health and social issues. Therefore, one need frequently expressed was funding opportunities with plans for sustainability—either through renewal opportunities for funding or through plans to transition from externally supported programs to community-supported programs. The necessity of employment was also a persistent theme within the topic of community need. Several participants shared that writing grants to assure funding for continued employment for others in the community was often motivation enough to complete the application process.

Networks

Networks were the primary method for sharing information regarding funding opportunities within communities and were described as formal and informal. The connectedness of individuals within the community and the value given to sharing information was of particular importance.

Formal networks comprised individuals who work in the community across various sectors who met and/or communicated on a regular schedule to share information about available funding, decide who is going to apply for which opportunities, and distribute opportunities so as to avoid duplication of effort within the community. One participant said,

We get it into a formal process of deciding . . . are we going to apply. If so, what department is going to apply? If so, what grant writer or grant writing team is going to apply . . . those are the major decision points that really need to be made . . .

One of the three reservations had a formal network for grant funding information sharing. The existence of a formal network was seen as an enhancer to sharing knowledge about funding information and organizing to apply for funding.

Informal networks were social or professional ties among community members who spread knowledge

regarding funding opportunities. Participants mentioned hearing about funding opportunities through coworkers, colleagues, and community members. If a specific funding opportunity did not fit one program or sector, that opportunity was shared with another program or sector. Participants thought this promoted good relations and future collaboration between sectors. One participant commented,

That we've had different entities, or agencies or groups, sort of band together . . . because sometimes one person's little program isn't enough to actually qualify for all the pieces so we need IHS [Indian Health Service] behind us and we need, you know, the tribes behind us, and we need . . . couple other entities from around the community like the schools partnering with us and what not, to be able to actually qualify for something.

Concerns were expressed regarding the effectiveness of informal networks, as an informal network, by nature, lacks structure. Barriers to informal networks were also addressed, such as lack of information sharing, and social and political boundaries that may affect willingness to share funding opportunity information.

Relationship With Funding Agency

Past success with a funding agency, technical assistance from the funding agency, and AI communities and funding agencies learning about one another were themes within this dimension. Overall, if the relationship with a funding agency was poor, communities were less likely to apply for funding from the agency. If the relationship was strong, the likelihood of engaging in the funding application process would increase.

Quality and availability of technical assistance throughout the funding application process contributed positively to the relationship with the funding agency. Participants reported that knowledge of a funding agency's mission could help increase understanding of the agency and improve the partnership. Funding agencies increasing their knowledge of the AI communities they hope to engage in their grant applications was an often-heard suggestion. Examples included personal visits, regular phone calls, or attempts to gain insight into the unique challenges and conditions existing in AI communities. One participant said,

There's nothing better than onsite visits, you know . . . and even then you're only going to get a superficial, you're not going to get to go into the homes

to see how, how they do live. And you're not gonna, just judging by abandoned cars in their yard, you're still not gonna get a good glimpse. . . . But I think it gives them an idea, when they come. . . . We had a project officer visit us during the round dance, the Veterans round dance. I think it's important to see that you know that, we are a cultural people.

In-person visits to the reservation community seemed to be the most meaningful gesture a funding agency could make to promote a positive relationship with the community.

Resources

Human and material resources were identified as necessary components in the funding application process. Human resources included staff, and individual knowledge, skills, and abilities. Most participants expressed a need for increased training in their communities. The limited number of individuals with grant-writing skills and high unemployment were seen as interconnected barriers to applying for funding. A small number of participants held positions in organizations dedicated to securing grants, while other participants applied for grants in addition to the other, often full-time duties of their position. One participant summarized this issue: "One of the big problems is we don't have just a grants person."

Grant-seeking, -writing, and skill development opportunities and access to technology and data were identified as material resources that support and promote the development of human resources. Grant-writing education and training varied across the communities. Individuals interested in grant writing often needed to travel outside the community, and sometimes out of the state, to attend sessions. Lack of computer availability and lack of Internet accessibility were identified as material resource barriers.

Some participants expressed appreciation for the existence of databases for demographics, financial, health, and social information, and others expressed a great need for these data. Initiating, compiling, and maintaining databases of information is a time- and energy-intensive task requiring human resources that are often not available.

► DISCUSSION

Similar to Salsberg et al.'s (2007) definition of community capacity, this study found capacity dimensions of AI community capacity in relation to the

funding application process are objective (*resources*) and environmental (*community leadership, community need, networking, relationship with funding agency*). Our findings also agree with others who show that capacity lies across the social-ecological domains of a community (Chaskin, 2001).

We identified community leadership as a key capacity dimension, including leadership directives, community participation, and the social-political climate. Others have shown that leadership is a critical element of community capacity and competence (Baezconde-Garbanati et al., 2007; Bopp, GermAnn, Bopp, Baugh Littlejohns, & Smith, 2000; Chaskin, 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Laverack, 1999; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007; Oetzel et al., 2011). Labonte and Laverack (2001) also suggest capacity-building efforts for community participation and leadership in the form of organizing events based around local interest for community members, and working with elected and informal leaders. Community need, another distinct dimension of capacity, may be affected by community leadership. This dimension includes a community's understanding of its actual needs and values. Other reports use the dimension "sense of community" to convey a community's understanding of, and investment in, itself (Baezconde-Garbanati et al., 2007; Bopp et al., 2000; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007; Oetzel et al., 2011). These two dimensions are areas where funding agencies could increase their capacity for partnering with AI communities by supporting local efforts to increase community participation in the application process and beyond, and by encouraging communities to apply for funding opportunities that are directly related to community need and/or consistent with community values.

The dimension of formal and informal networks was similar to Cajate's (2000) community-building models that honor the indigenous values of direct experience, interconnectedness, communication, and relationship. Other studies on indigenous community capacity identified dimensions similar to ours, such as community collaboration (Baezconde-Garbanati et al., 2007) and communication (Oetzel et al., 2011). Non-AI studies exploring community capacity identified dimensions such as social and interorganizational networks (Goodman et al., 1998), links with others (Laverack, 1999), and communication (Bopp et al., 2000).

Relationship with the funding agency, or thought of more broadly, external relationships, was a unique and important dimension to this study. Two of the previously reviewed community capacity concepts for non-AI and AI communities include an element emphasizing a connection to partners outside the community. Elements such as the "role of external supports"

TABLE 3
Example Strategies for Improving Funding Partnerships Between AI Communities and Funding Agencies

<i>Dimensions of Capacity</i>	<i>Community Need</i>	<i>Relationship With Funding Agency</i>	<i>Resources</i>
Example strategies	<p>Provide flexibility in grant opportunities, allowing communities to use funds in ways that reflect community values and needs and that build on community strengths.</p> <p>Have discussions with community members about how best to write proposals that meet agency requirements while addressing community-defined need and values.</p>	<p>Contact individuals in AI communities to share funding opportunities in the form of e-mails, U.S. mail, local newspapers, radio, or community service television.</p> <p>Visit AI communities in person to learn about the community and establish relationships.</p> <p>There is great diversity among the tribal nations—ask about how to best learn about the community and ask the community’s process for applying for funding.</p>	<p>In addition to offering funding for delivering programs, offer funding for capacity development to improve human and material resources.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for community members to learn grant writing skills, budget skills, etc; as communities are diverse, needs will vary widely across communities.</p> <p>Ask communities for their ideas on capacity-building activities that could be sponsored jointly with funding agencies.</p>

NOTE: AI = American Indian.

(MacLellan-Wright et al., 2007) and the “role of outside agents” (Laverack, 1999) indicate the significance of relationship between communities and peripheral agencies. The value placed on direct experience—effort made by funding agency staff to build an in-person relationship with the community, such as phone calls and visits—is a finding that funding agencies should be aware of to assist in developing successful applications from AI communities. As noted previously, there are organizations that offer technical assistance to AI communities; that these resources were not mentioned in the interviews may be evidence that these opportunities were not available at the time of this study, or that their availability is not widely known.

Finally, human and material resources were identified as necessary components in the funding application process. Dimensions regarding human and material resources are most commonly addressed in studies that have examined general community capacity. For example, Bopp et al. (2000) refer to “resources, knowledge and skills,” while MacLellan-Wright et al. (2007) identify the dimension as “skills, knowledge, and learning,” which refers to skills or access to skills needed for project success and providing community members with opportunities for learning. “Resource mobilization,” which refers to the effectiveness of accessing internal

and external resources for project success, is a similar dimension (Laverack, 1999; MacLellan-Wright et al., 2007). Goodman et al. (1998) also separated the dimensions of “skills” and “resources”; in this case, “skills” are characterized by elements such as group process abilities, data collection and assessment, problem solving, and resource mobilization, while “resources” are characterized by elements such as access and sharing of internal and external resources, social capital, and communication channels within the community. An increase in both human resources and material resources within AI communities may better prepare communities for an increased number of successful grant applications.

► CONCLUSION

Implementing capacity-building strategies to address gaps and build on strengths identified in this study may serve to improve the funding application process and therefore increase funding for health promotion in AI communities. This study may help lay the groundwork from which to address this issue in practice; AI community capacity dimensions represent the culturally unique values and priorities existing in relation to the funding application process. We hope this study serves

as a starting point to further investigate strategies to increase successful partnerships between AI communities and funding agencies. Table 3 provides examples of strategies based on dimensions of capacity. Perceived strengths of capacity dimensions varied across AI reservation communities. As this was an exploratory study with a small sample size, future research might include increasing the number of communities and interviews. This would support an expanded understanding of funding capacity, enable communities to learn from each other how to increase funding capacity, and enable funding agencies to more effectively partner with AI communities. Efforts based within the context of these unique AI values and characteristics may serve to improve the overall health and well-being of community members residing on AI reservations across the state of Montana.

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