



How We Are Building a Culture of Learning to Advance Equity-Centered and Inclusive Practices

Case Studies

At a Glance

Equitable growth requires inclusion at every step of design and decision-making. We need to better understand *how* we are practicing inclusion to close equity gaps across a multitude of regional contexts, histories, and perspectives. Case studies are part of our ongoing efforts to capture how we are testing our concepts and strategies, grounding our learning in real examples, and understanding unmet needs across a number of different regional and programmatic contexts.

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Case Studies About Inclusive Process

To support and encourage broader learning and adoption of equity-centered and inclusive practices among our peers and partners, we are sharing three project-based case studies that have emerged from our current work. These case studies reflect our guiding principle: inclusion in the process. We've been learning—and research supports the idea—that to achieve equitable outcomes, inclusion must be part of the design, decision-making, and implementation of programs, policies, and systems. Here, we have captured our approaches and lessons learned in the interest of better understanding the strategies, innovations, and areas for improvement across different regional and programmatic contexts.

Case Study 1: Incorporating Worker Voice to Guide Project Design

In this case study, we explore how worker voice was incorporated into project design components by the [Fresno-Merced Future of Food Innovation](#) coalition to create an agriculture certificate program that is responsive to the lived realities of learners and workers in the Fresno region of California.

Case Study 2: Supporting Distributed and Localized Power for Policy Development

In partnership with the [Community Engagement for College Success Network](#), we have been learning how leaders from different community-based organizations can evolve from representing distinct organizational voices to building collective capacity for leading a political movement.

Case Study 3: Incorporating Stakeholder Voice in Philanthropic Fund Development and Deployment

In this case study, we unpack how our team is collaborating with grantees and funders to design, deploy, and evaluate the [High Road Training Fund](#). This grant program complements public funding with money from private sources to advance the principles of economic equity, job quality, and climate resilience in the [High Road Training Partnerships](#) initiative.

Case Study 1: Incorporating Worker Voice to Guide Project Design

Project Team: Ana Gutierrez, Alison Schmitt, Molly Dow, Cesilia Acevedo

The [Fresno-Merced Future of Food \(F3\) Innovation](#) coalition recently received a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Build Back Better Regional Challenge award, bringing a historic \$65.1 million to California's Central Valley. The goal is to leverage the region's phenomenal concentration of agricultural businesses and expertise to develop a world-class, climate-smart food and agriculture technology engineering cluster that develops advanced, sustainable food manufacturing and production technologies. This promises to generate tremendous growth in quality jobs: F3 intends to double the annual workforce pipeline to over 8,400 job-ready workers in four years, enabling a 40% increase in wage growth on average and moving the region toward increased workforce equity. However, with the agricultural industry evolving faster every day and the use of automation expanding in the Central Valley, it is important to Jobs for the Future (JFF) and regional leaders that the voices of the workers and learners facing these realities are incorporated into the F3 initiative's decision-making and design processes.

Farmworkers' perspectives played a central role in the design of components of the F3 project. One product that has emerged from the unique collaborative process is the applied agriculture systems certificate program, which provides training aligned to the industry's needs. Typically, only faculty members are involved in developing academic certificate programs. However, as part of this initiative, JFF facilitated a process whereby leaders from two trusted organizations—the California Farmworker Foundation and the Binational of Central California—led conversations around the design of the EDA grant application, the curriculum, and learner personas to guide equity-centered implementation.

Leaders from the farmworker organizations worked with community college faculty members and industry leaders to develop the grant application, laying the groundwork for community collaboration and co-design. Incorporating farmworkers' perspectives into the overall EDA grant application process ensured that the proposal included elements that would help farmworkers access and complete the training, such as flexible delivery models, worker instructors and ambassadors, wraparound supports, and career navigation services.

Through their participation in a series of collaborative design sessions, farmworkers were also instrumental in the design of the certificate curriculum itself. The certificate is an industry-

aligned and recognized stackable credential intended to have on-ramps to degree-bearing pathways; deliver flexible, self-paced training focused on learning outcomes, skills demonstration, and on-the-job training; and provide tailored career navigation counseling to connect students to next-generation job opportunities. As a result of these collaborative sessions, the design team began to brainstorm new delivery methods that would make this regional certificate accessible for workers, such as onsite instruction at their employers and instruction times that fit with their schedules.

Lastly, the inclusive and collaborative process resulted in three learner personas that helped inform the regional certificate design and avoid unintentionally introducing barriers for target learners/workers. Personas are fictional profiles that can help tell a powerful story about the personalized goals, needs, and characteristics of user populations to establish consistency in designing solutions for them. We observed a change in faculty members' thinking as they started using the worker personas when discussing the design of their programs, with their view of the typical community college student evolving to include farmworkers and their unique needs and barriers.

Centering inclusion throughout this design process created a foundation for the continued incorporation of worker voice as the project moves into the implementation phase. Our team saw an increase in the level of trust between community college faculty members and community-based organization (CBO) leaders, who can now lean on each other and their expertise for future partnerships and training pilots as this project evolves. To ensure that the inclusion of worker voice continues and that workers' needs remain front and center, the JFF team created an implementation blueprint slide deck. This document provides F3 implementation leads with a summary of relevant work completed to date and a set of key decision points and action steps.

One of our key lessons learned from this initiative is how inclusion works across and within a region in the design and development of unique but interconnected initiatives and projects. Central to building inclusion within and among groups that have limited experience designing solutions together has been the creation of safe, brave, and inclusive spaces for productive discussion. This involved building trust and addressing the power dynamics between traditional system stakeholders, such as community college leaders, and community-based leaders, students, and farmworkers, so that program beneficiaries could not only inform but lead the decision-making process.

Case Study 2: Supporting Distributed and Localized Power for Policy Development

Project Team: Erica Acevedo, Vanessa Vela Lovelace, Holly Siino, Ana Gutierrez, Joel Vargas

CBOs can play a unique role in regional college-to-career ecosystems: They often offer critical academic and wraparound supports in addition to maintaining deep community connections, retaining historical knowledge, and earning residents' trust in addressing and advocating for equity-minded policies and services. To leverage and build upon the collective assets and power of CBOs, the [College Futures Foundation](#) launched the [Community Engagement for College Success Network \(CECSN\)](#) in partnership with JFF, Education Trust-West, and 11 CBOs representing Los Angeles and the Inland Empire and Fresno regions. The goal is to boost higher education access, affordability, and success in communities of color.

Since 2018, we and our partners have been learning what it means to create an inclusive network, not only for the CBOs directly involved but also for the larger, diverse group of stakeholders they represent. First and foremost, the mindset and orientation of the College Futures Foundation has been critical to successfully creating the space and time for CECSN to evolve in ways that are organic and meaningful to its members. This has required the College Futures Foundation to provide flexible capacity-building dollars, open feedback loops with grantees, and establish a high degree of trust and power sharing that enables the CBOs to set the agenda and define success. CECSN's members believe that everything from program design and decision-making to policy and advocacy campaigns must incorporate stakeholder voice, validation, and collaboration. For JFF, this has meant setting aside time for stakeholder feedback processes and iteration when making major decisions.

Now, four years after the CECSN pilot first began, we are seeing multiple examples of how inclusion through distributed power within the network can affect policy for college success. Key among member-led CECSN activities has been the development of a [2022-23 budget letter](#) advocating for investments in students' basic needs and an equitable COVID-19 recovery. Furthermore, the group established an inclusive planning and decision-making process rooted in the equitable consensus model to guide current and future work. As the network moves into a new phase of work, JFF and its partners will continue to provide support to ensure that community leaders, families, and students can co-create solutions to drive more equity-minded policies and practices.

The CECSN initiative has given JFF the opportunity to lean into many of the expert tools in our toolbox, including providing capacity-building support around equity in higher education, coaching participants, and facilitating meetings and tough conversations. While we regularly co-create events and deliverables with partners, this project has required us to hand over the reins in new and different ways. It has also meant that we are not driving the conversations or setting the agendas. Though this has been uncomfortable and disorientating at times, it has also given CECSN the tools it needs to embrace its role and ultimately sustain itself. We are continuing to learn how, as an intermediary, we can best support member-led networks that empower families and communities to be the drivers of change.

Case Study 3: Incorporating Stakeholder Voice in Philanthropic Fund Development and Deployment

Project Team: Sanjana Seth, Ana Gutierrez, Kathryn Uhl, Ashleigh Smallwood

In partnership with the Governor's Office of Social Innovation, the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB), and the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, JFF launched the [High Road Training Fund](#) (HRTF) in August 2022 to contribute to the state's "high road" vision for advancing job quality, equity, and climate resilience. California's high road vision is an industry-based, worker-centered framework aimed at promoting more equitable economic prosperity. A key goal of the HRTF is to maximize public investments for regional partnerships through its new public-private partnership model, by providing flexible funding in the form of large subgrants of up to \$500,000 to participants in the [High Road Training Partnerships](#) initiative.

Through this project, we have had the opportunity to work with partners and incorporate stakeholder voice into the HRTF's development and deployment processes. Equity, a key component of California's high road vision, was a critical driver behind the creation, development, and implementation of the HRTF. The JFF team worked in close collaboration with state and regional partners, as well as experts in trust-based philanthropy, to carry this principle into the fund's design and create equitable processes for deploying funds and for measuring the equitable impact of public investments.

We co-designed the fund with the CWDB during a series of sessions in which we discussed key HRTF structural elements and operational resources, such as HRTF use cases and the grant application itself. JFF also held a focus group with potential grant recipients to validate and

provide input into the design and structure of the fund. Grantees' needs emerged during these meetings and informed key design decisions, including payment terms, upfront versus reimbursable payments, flexible uses of the fund, and the removal of burdensome reporting requirements. Our approach of building trust and shared accountability with partners and key stakeholders during the fund implementation phase set a foundation for inclusion in the HRTF's implementation.

We are committed to continuing to evaluate our progress toward designing an equity-centered fund and are putting mechanisms in place to do so. For example, the team is conducting an annual survey with grantees to understand their evolving needs, and it is bringing a developmental evaluator on board to support our ongoing learning. We plan to engage more deeply with our partners and incorporate meaningful feedback loops for all stakeholders involved in the HRTF, including grantees, funders, and partners. We are also exploring opportunities to give grantees and workers greater power through channels such as a broader fund steering committee.

The reflective learning approach embedded in how we are managing the HRTF requires our team to be open to feedback and critical reflection. This has meant that the team is in a continuous cycle of learning and evaluation to ensure that its strategies and activities are in service of reimagining the 21st-century public workforce system. We schedule regular opportunities for shared learning and have pivoted based on the feedback received from grantees and partners. The opportunity is clear: An HRTF model that is centered in equity and inclusion can serve as a catalyst for increasing the impact of the high road partnership model and ultimately the economic prosperity of regions and communities across California.