

# Centering UNTAPPED Communities

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YOUR  
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HISTORY COLORADO



Mural created by artist Adri Norris for the Five Points Plus Neighborhood Memory Project in Denver, part of History Colorado's Museum of Memory initiative in 2021.

## Volunteer STRATEGY

By Emily Dobish and María Islas-López

History organizations have a long tradition of volunteer involvement in their work. Volunteers are engaged in welcoming and guiding visitors, engaging school kids and adult learners, supporting fundraising, and many behind-the-scenes efforts. Who are the volunteers that are contributing to the work in your organizations? Who is included and who is excluded? What is the relationship between volunteerism and community engagement, particularly racial equity work? Our goal is to provide a practice-based illustration of the possibilities for centering untapped communities in your volunteer strategies and their abilities for social impact.

There are a few important concepts we need to clarify. First, what do we mean by the term untapped communities?<sup>1</sup>

Community is a very complicated term; its meaning often varies depending on who is defining it and how it's being used. And despite this, it is a very popular and valuable word in our fields. It is safe to say that the word community features in most of our mission statements and in many of the funding opportunities we have all applied for in the past. And because the word community does not fit into a nice, neat package, it is very important to think about what we and you in your organization mean when we all use the word com-

<sup>1</sup> How communities we are addressing have been identified, and identify themselves, varies. Being mindful of this and using language that is accepted by the community you are working with is important.

This article is adapted from a 2021 Online Conference session. To view the full presentation, visit [learn.aaslh.org](https://learn.aaslh.org).

munity in our work. Especially, because community is about people: Who do we think about when we use that word? Though a more important question is: Who have we not thought about when we use that word?

In our work at History Colorado, because we are the state historical society, conversations about community are grounded geographically in Colorado. And particularly over the past year, these conversations have made us recognize even more that we have been historically excluding Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color from participating and being represented in the life of our organization



History Colorado in Denver.

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for the past 142 years because of the dynamics of power, privilege, and race. We are referring to these communities as untapped communities, as opposed to underrepresented, underserved, or marginalized to embrace a vocabulary that stresses assets, not deficits. A big concern in our organization is the developing

of a deeper understanding of how we had built connections with those underheard community groups in the past and the possibilities of rebuilding these connections in inclusive, reciprocal, and more productive ways. Thus, when we refer to centering untapped communities in our practice, that refers to the incorporation of the community needs from their own perspective as the driving force of all our efforts. In other words, it refers to developing more inclusive decision-making processes in our work.

Centering community means taking time and creating spaces for understanding the strengths, talents, motivations, and interests of community members and embracing these as crucial components of our program design and implementation. Centering community means putting together community needs and motivations for engagement at the forefront of the way that we are doing our work. Depending on the field or industry that you belong to, centering community can be referred to as community-led, co-creation, co-production, or even participatory approaches.

Let's now consider: What is a volunteer? The most basic definition of a volunteer is any unpaid labor that contributes to the mission of the organization. It's as simple as that. Volunteers are board members, interns, students, fellows who received stipends to cover research supplies, community members supporting our programs and exhibit implementation, community partners, and advisory boards. They range from school age to senior citizens. It's important to have all of these voices included in your volunteer team, including whoever comes to your

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mind first when you think of volunteers, and those you may not think of at first as well. There are multiple ways volunteers can contribute and having them as part of your team enriches the programs and exhibits at your organizations. How you think about communities and how you define what a volunteer is matters, as does how you engage with them and design strategies for involvement. Don't assume that a volunteer is only someone who has

extra time, or that only people who can afford not receiving money for their time want to volunteer. We have found that many people from various backgrounds and income brackets share skills and talents in multiple ways. How you think about this matters because framework translates into practice. The way you think translates into the way you act.

When we are able to acknowledge and recognize our own history and how we've silenced some communities in the engagement of our work, including volunteering, it opens the door to more conversations and eventually engagement. In the summer of 2020, the staff team came together at a grassroots level to create grounding virtues for the organization. The virtues include being in community; amplifying and centering voices of Black, Indigenous, and people of color; co-creation and shared authority; humility and reflection; responsiveness and flexibility; and shared destiny. These virtues were created to acknowledge some of the historic truths about our organization. It is important to include all voices, but also to acknowledge that historically we have not done so. It is not an easy process and something that has to be sincere. Who are the people you engage with? Who are those you have prioritized in stories you are telling? And who have you not? Who are the voices that are missing? Your volunteer strategy needs to be intentional in including these voices in your programs. This has to be an institutional strategy and not just a volunteer strategy.



School program interns at History Colorado.

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History Colorado's Chief of Equity and Engagement Marissa Volpe speaking at the Globeville-Elyria-Swansea Neighborhood Memory Project community share-back event in Denver, a 2018 Museum of Memory initiative.

Central to this context of volunteer engagement practice is the principle of reciprocity: seeking, recognizing, respecting, and incorporating the knowledge, perspectives, and resources that everybody brings to a collaboration. Volunteers are indeed our collaborators; thus it is very important to ask what is a mutual benefit of engaging in volunteer practices? Mutual benefit means the meaningful outcomes expected by our organization and volunteers as we are involved in collaborations. History Colorado in the fiscal year 2021 had 1,116 volunteers who donated over 41,000 hours of their work to the organization. Their hours that they shared with us are valued at over \$1.2 million. Volunteers are not only contributing to the completion of tasks, but they are building capacity within the organization in ways that are not necessarily that obvious. Volunteers also have meaningful outcomes that result from participating with us. From evaluation and conversations we've had with volunteers, we've learned that there is an increased sense of physical and mental well-being for volunteers. There are the benefits of social connection and continuous learning.

We want to share with you what the collective impact of the work is, how we have centered different communities, and what we gained from those efforts. The following examples address ways that have supported our efforts in our practices, aligning program goals with the community's needs and priorities, embedding opportunities for ongoing listening and learning into program design and implementation, embracing our role as facilitators and process experts in creating space for the community to take the lead, and trusting the expertise and knowledge of the community for addressing their own needs.

The Museum of Memory program creates opportunities for communities in Colorado that have long existed on the margins to collaborate in exploring their past through com-

munity-based memory projects that involve memory workshops, grassroots collection of oral histories and photos, and community share-backs through the arts. Through this process, communities document their own history. They decide how to remember it and locate the best ways to narrate it to themselves and others, and these histories are guaranteed preservation and accessibility through History Colorado's permanent collection. The projects involve a long process that goes from community outreach to working with communities to co-author their rich and mostly unheard histories through place- and context-based collective remembering to interfacing with curators and those in charge of our collections.

A project in Denver is called "Voces del Centro Humanitario: Trabajo, Barreras y Esperanza en Tiempos de COVID-19" ("Voices from the Centro Humanitario: Labor, Barriers and Hope in Times of COVID-19"). This project is a result of a partnership between the Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores, a labor center in Denver that provides education, advocacy, and resources for low-wage immigrant workers, and History Colorado's Museum of Memory. Since summer 2020, we have been supporting the Centro Humanitario and guiding them into the development and implementation of their own community oral history project. The project aims to amplify and provide visibility to the low-wage Latino immigrant workforce in the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood metropolitan area, while also supporting Centro Humanitario's needs for understanding their members' experiences during the pandemic and providing professional liaisons and empowerment to their team of community liaisons. It's very important to mention that the Centro Humanitario has been central in the distribution of COVID resources in the Denver metropolitan area and to date have distributed over \$6 million worth of COVID relief among the low-wage immigrant worker community. It was very important for them to understand not only the impact of their efforts in the community, but also to develop and build capacity to document this information so it can be also shared with their funders who provided these resources. While this



Photo portrait of the Don Diego and Meraz family for the "Voices of Centro Humanitario: Labor, Barriers and Hope in Times of COVID-19" memory project in Denver, part of History Colorado's Museum of Memory initiative in 2021.



Arrupe students in the work study program.

project contributes to Centro Humanitario's mission, it also contributes voices of Latino families to History Colorado's History in the Making COVID-19 Collecting Campaign. This is a campaign that started a few weeks after the pandemic hit and it has been extremely successful at documenting pandemic life for all Colorado communities.

This project received grant funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities' Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, as part of a much larger initiative at History Colorado that is intentionally employing community-based approaches to reach the Latino communities' experiences of the pandemic. The organization's team has received twenty-four hours of synchronous oral history training in Spanish to do oral histories via Zoom, as well as one-on-one project consultation over the past eleven months. They have been fully in charge of the design and implementation of the resulting Spanish language community oral history project, and this project has produced oral histories and a collection of community portraits that speak to the experiences of one of the most silenced voices of the pandemic. This collection, which is now in our permanent collection, explores the pandemic's disproportionate impact on the low-wage immigrant community due to structural inequities and discrimination.

The experience of working on this project has exceeded the expectations of everybody involved and has shown us the impact that centering an untapped community in our practices can have for all the stakeholders involved, including volunteers. For volunteers, this project reached younger generations of activists and first-generation Latino and Latina students who have supported the preservation, community access, and public-facing elements of this project. Working on a project that directly speaks to some of the experiences of their families during the pandemic, and the training that we have provided to volunteers working on this project, has really allowed them to further develop skills in community engagement and equity work, while providing opportunities for self-reflection, empowerment, and identity work. They are contributing to very

important conversations about power, privilege, and inequalities in their own communities as well as shaping the role that a cultural institution like ours has in addressing these issues.

Our next example is our work with Arrupe Jesuit High School. In 2019, they asked if we'd partner with them as a placement site for their work study program. Most students in this program come from economically disadvantaged families. The school's goal is for students to get college prep education and build workplace skills while allowing them to earn a large portion of their education cost. This program met many needs for us, including providing a pathway to the nonprofit field for students who may not have seen this as a visible career path before, with the hopes that in the future, students that have opportunities like this will apply for positions in our field. The importance of having community voices represented on the staff team had been acknowledged, but still our staff has been majority white.

A challenge to this partnership was a real hesitancy by staff to bring on high school students. Staff had many conversations with me and our Chief of Equity and Engagement to talk about the benefits of bringing on high school students, both in gaining a youth perspective and opening up access to our field. By training work study students to do entry-level work, these students have increased our capacity and formed bonds with staff to such an extent that they request repeat placements in their departments.

Lastly, in 2018 the collection staff came together to form a Collections Diversity Fellowship as a result of the public and organizational realization that our collection did not reflect the diverse communities that make up Colorado. The fellowship was created as a proactive initiative to bring more diverse experiences and individuals into History Colorado. In talking with community members, it was pointed out that targeted recruiting was needed as many did not see the museum or the fellowship in the museum as a place that was inviting to them. At the same time, HR staff was hesitant to target groups in recruitment efforts so language was kept vague.

The result was that the community members we created this for didn't apply, for the most part. Instead, we had applications from the same people who have always applied. The assumption was that we were looking for people to help diversify the collection itself, when the goal was both to do that and to have diverse voices making those decisions. Changes in our application and recruitment clearly needed to be made. In December 2020, the Chief of Equity and Engagement and I met with the collections and curation team to update our application language and define diversity for this fellowship, resulting in this statement: "History Colorado is committed to antiracism practices across its institution and outlined in these grounding virtues. As such, we encourage members of Black, Indigenous, people of color, LGBTQ+, and persons with disabilities communities to apply for the diversity fellowship." Along with that change, we also started reaching out to stakeholders in the communities we were trying to reach, which included the Colorado Black, Asian, and Hispanic Chamber of Commerce organizations, as well as personally inviting candidates to apply.

Since then, we've heard from applicants that our grounding virtues and commitment to co-creation with the community made them look into our internships as a place to gain skills and experience. We are now receiving applicants and hiring fellows and interns that meet both the community and organizational goals that we had set out.

When interviewing, we're also asking questions to the candidates to see how their lived experience could help them in the role they're applying for, recognizing that it's not just the academic or university experience that makes someone a qualified candidate.

This has inspired us to make that language change in many of our internship and volunteer roles. And we now ask candidates for all intern and staff positions to share with us how those grounding virtues have shown up in previous work and/or how they would contribute to these virtues in their internship or job position at History Colorado.

Working with untapped communities has really challenged the way we think about volunteering, but the volunteer program does not exist in a vacuum. Changes that the entire organization made—which include shifts in our exhibits and programs, placing the volunteer engagement program in the equity and engagement department, and collaborating with untapped communities for oral history projects—have really expanded the engagement of those communities with our volunteer program because the work matters to them. People want to participate where they see themselves in the work. When you can bring an untapped community in to co-create, they will want to be a part of your efforts!

What does it take to do this work? We found that we need to be comfortable with discomfort and in not taking the lead in our programs, but also with how our volunteers might contribute their insights to our work. We also learned that it's important to understand your capacity as an organization. What can you really do? How can you effectively engage with communities based on the resources that you have? We learned that you need to reflect to see if the structures that you have in place meet the needs of both your organizations and the community, and similarly for the volunteers. And one of the most important things we learned is that we need to document. It is important to continually evaluate, reflect on, and tweak our practices to meet the changes and needs of both the communities that you are co-creating with and the organization itself.

Why is it important to center the community in program development and implementation? Because when the community is centered, the work matters to them. There's more engagement and the work that has been done is more meaningful to them. And when you find participatory ways in which you are co-creating with others, in which you are bringing them into decision-making processes, the knowledge

that you produce and the outcome of the efforts are also more helpful for the communities themselves.

How is this work conducive to the social good? This work has resulted in reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships with community stakeholders, co-creation of knowledge, amplification of community stories, and solutions for community problems as seen in our examples. Professional develop-

ment of younger generations of nonprofit professionals opens their ability to enter the field, connects with individuals and communities, amplifies voices, and expands the role people play in their communities. Pathways created through volunteer and intern and fellow programs open possibilities to fields and jobs. It matters to be intentional about bringing change to the community. We also

learned that attitudes need to

change in the institution, including attitudes on the levels of expertise we are bringing to the table, the idea that only certain people can volunteer, and resistance to experimentation.

Who are the volunteers who are contributing to the work in your organization? Who is included and who is excluded? How does your organization define community? What are the communities you are working with, or that you would like to work with? What are the different forms of engagement you are currently doing with untapped communities in particular? Do you have the capacity or the budget to engage in this kind of work? And if not, how else can you support this work, or what do you need to support this work? What are you gaining from this work? What are the community members gaining from it and how do you know? What is the potential for social impact by engaging with communities and how do you know if you're succeeding? Overall, the goal is for us to have a real partnership, not only with the community at large, but also with our volunteers in general. And it's a partnership of skills and strengths that builds something meaningful together.



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Mural created by artist Sophie Fernandez Healey for History Colorado's Salt Creek Neighborhood Memory Project in Pueblo, a 2016 Museum of Memory initiative.