

Inclusive Business Resource Network Program Development

Preliminary Summary of Findings

July 2021

In 2021, the [Inclusive Business Resource Network](#) program, administered through Prosper Portland, solicited input of BIPOC business owners to inform the development of future programming. We collaborated with AB Cultural Drivers to facilitate eight focus groups and hear directly from small business owners. Focus groups took place in racial/ethnic affinity for Native American/Indigenous owners, Black/African American owners, Spanish speaking owners, and Asian and Pacific Islander owners. Additionally, two groups of mixed-race/ethnicity owners, and one women of color group also took place. While we are developing a more formal report, this memo is a high-level overview of preliminary findings.

Who we heard from:

Across the eight focus groups, we heard the experiences of 52 BIPOC business owners. Participants shared about who they are and what kind of businesses they own, including:

- Artists and creators who work to celebrate their heritage and culture
- Restaurant and food production owners who manage staff, design menus, and work in both front and back of house
- Owners who provide direct services to clients, including cleaning and custodial businesses, racial equity practitioners and consultants, beauty and care industry owners

Owners shared their motivations to start businesses and their entrepreneurship journey:

- Honor cultural heritage and increase representation
- Opportunities didn't exist elsewhere
- The desire to self-determine their own business culture and future
- Create financial opportunities for themselves and families

What we heard:

While the representation of the business owners was diverse, the participants had many shared experiences. The following are the most salient findings about the barriers business owners experience, supports that have made a difference, meaningful business milestones, and direct program recommendations.

“I just also wanted to make my people proud of them, I'm pretty pro black, if that's a term that people use, I wanted to make my people proud, because when this thing takes off, and starts getting a lot of traction, I have a lot of amazing mentors, and a lot of amazing investors ready for us to go into the next step”

“[we] want to be mindful that there is a lot of trauma woven into the experiences that we’re sharing and trauma that was there before the business was implemented... And stepping into white dominant institutions, or ways of doing business can be challenging on maintaining our integrity and our values”

Shared experiences of encountering structural barriers and racism

In this section, five key areas illuminate the challenges that BIPOC business owners have faced in Portland. Owners were generous and brave to share openly about the explicit and implicit racism that they have experienced.

1. Experiences of explicit racism and discrimination
2. Anti-black racism in Portland
3. Intersectional experiences of discrimination
4. Navigating dominant culture; white culture vs relational culture of BIPOC
5. Desire to see representation of their race/ethnicity in the business community

Findings related to technical barriers in business ownership

Participants experienced and identified five main technical barriers to moving their businesses forward.

1. Setting up their business and understanding business structures, permitting, and taxes
2. Need for know-how in digital marketing strategy and/or having the time and resources to invest in advertising and social networking
3. Desire for diversifying and finding new business networks that are traditionally white spaces
4. Business strategy and decision-making with limited resources
5. Connection to mentors, advisers, sounding boards to share frustrations, experiences, and learnings

Experiences of financial barriers

Business owners identified four common challenges in accessing capital, financial pressures, and long-term financial prosperity.

1. Finding and accessing startup capital to get their business going
2. Securing bank financing and validating the risk level of loans
3. Cumbersome and competitive grants and loans structure/application process
4. A culture of favoring bigger, long-term established businesses in the financing process

Barriers due to the COVID pandemic and economic crisis

The unexpected pandemic and constant changes to public health and safety requirements took a toll on business owners and further exacerbated disparities among BIPOC business owners.

1. Changed the format of business – many owners had to quickly pivot business offerings and look for alternatives to work
2. Transitioning their business model to digital landscape and navigating new technologies
3. Keeping, securing, paying qualified staff – while federal funding and grants helped many, the challenge of keeping businesses open and staffed, and making payroll were substantial challenges.
4. Financial risk-taking during a recession – navigating sudden change in revenue left business owners in the difficult position of deciding how much financial risk they were willing to tolerate.

Business supports that have worked

Despite challenges, business owners were able to identify helpful interventions and supports that provided a meaningful difference in the success of their business.

1. Relationship building, networking, and finding community – opportunities to engage with BIPOC business owners help create a sense of belonging, a chance to share struggles and successes, and connect to broader networks
2. Culturally specific support – in addition to networking, participants (particularly those who participated in racial affinity groups) reported the necessity to share stories and support with other business owners from their respective cultures
3. Simple applications/intakes for services and supports – many supports available come with complex application processes; owners appreciated when services are clear and upfront about expectations and procedures

Meaningful business milestones and outcomes

1. Knowledge of navigating systems/ supports – permitting, getting established, knowing where resources are
2. Connection to other BIPOC-owned businesses, having a sense of community
3. Financial security, ability to bounce back from economic downturn

4. Increased confidence and being able to share with/ mentor other new business owners
5. Sharing vision and cultural heritage with customers and sensing appreciation

Strengths brought to the small business community

1. Tenacity and resiliency
2. Authenticity and creativity
3. Adaptability and ability (forced) to navigate systems

Differences among the racial affinity focus groups

While the findings above were salient across the eight focus groups, there were unique findings in the individual groups that reflect nuance between culture and relationships.

1. A sense of cultural appreciation and gratitude – the AAPI focus group shared a sense of appreciation and excitement to share a space together. This could be for a multitude of reasons, but of note: the group was created later in the recruitment process, and often AAPI communities are not included in conversations about underrepresented populations due to the model minority myth. Similarly, the Spanish-speaking group reflected on the unique opportunity to talk about business in Spanish and among their peers.
2. Desire to call out effects of colonization and need for healing – the Native American/ Indigenous focus group shared reflections on the deep impacts

“the key is, you need one to get in and, I mean, I think I'm phenomenal. I'm just, I'm good at what I do. But that's not enough. If someone isn't going to give you access and give you the opportunity, I don't care how good you are... But I don't get these outreach efforts that are done because I don't know who they're reaching. I don't know. It is bizarre to me, because folks of color, we are relational. And if, you know, if you want to know us, reach out to us.”

their businesses experience from colonialism. These impacts are felt in the experience of business ownership but also deeply affect the individual. A shared desire for collective healing and holding space for pain was expressed.

3. Both the Black/ African American affinity group and Women of Color affinity group expressed strong response and criticism about their experience with city government and Prosper Portland. Both groups were candid about their frustration and the need to repair trust.
4. The two general BIPOC focus groups expressed a shared sentiment of appreciation and desire for programming, but the group cohesion and shared cultural experience was not as strong – this could have influenced what was shared among those groups



Building an Equitable Economy

Direct recommendations to Prosper Portland

1. **Advocacy/ using power/ accountability** – while direct supports are important, participants want Prosper Portland to be thoughtful about ways it can directly use its institutional power to advocate on behalf of business owners; for example, in budget allocations and grant selection prioritizations.
2. **Program design by BIPOC owners** – Participants were interested in seeing programs designed by people who understand and have lived experience of being a BIPOC business owner in Portland; for example, Mercatus, My People’s Market, Neighborhood Prosperity Network.
3. **Public procurement from BIPOC businesses** – The city’s procurement process should be evaluated with a racial equity lens
4. **Resource sharing and a hub for connection** – Business owners would like to have a central place where business information is available and easily accessible
5. **Culturally specific programming and relationships** – Nurture and promote successful relationships with community organizations that create culturally specific opportunities
6. **An opportunity to be heard** – while not called out explicitly, business owners shared a sense of appreciation of their voices, stories, cultures, and challenges being heard. They are eager to see their stories turn into direct action for specific communities.