



# INNOVATIONS IN FINANCIAL CAPABILITY:

Culturally Responsive &  
Multigenerational Wealth Building  
Practices In Asian Pacific Islander  
(API) Communities

## APPRECIATION

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### FUNDERS:

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## INTRODUCTION

Wealth inequality is at the forefront of social issues drawing public concern and momentum in the United States. Research has shown that social policies and structures deepen and reinforce economic inequality between Whites and communities of color.<sup>1</sup> Wealth building opportunities also vary based on the unique ethnic, racial, immigration, and sociopolitical histories of specific communities of color. The wealth positioning of Asian Pacific Islanders (APIs) is complex and frequently misunderstood because of broad generalizations and data challenges. For example, median wealth measures place APIs on par with Whites. However, this obscures the dramatic wealth gap among API ethnic communities. The wealthiest APIs hold 168 times the wealth of the bottom 20 percent, a gap that is larger than for other groups. A significantly larger share of API families have little to no wealth, and wealth inequality among APIs is growing faster than for any other racial/ethnic group in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> More research is needed to identify barriers to and facilitators of wealth building for APIs in the U.S. with a goal of enhancing the economic wellbeing of all groups within this diverse community.<sup>3</sup>

Across the nation, researchers and practitioners are exploring the effectiveness of programs that work with young people and their family members to increase economic stability and wellbeing within the family unit. API households are more likely than any other ethnic group to live in a multigenerational household, and multigenerational service delivery models have long been the norm in API communities.<sup>4</sup> Yet, little is known about how and to what extent such culturally relevant approaches are being used in the delivery of financial capability programming in API communities, and with what effects.

In partnership with National CAPACD, Hawaiian Community Assets (HCA), and Council on Native Hawaiian Advancement (CNHA) the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University conducted a survey designed to address some of these important gaps in the field. The survey was part of a larger study documenting a Hawaii-based program that uses multigenerational asset building approaches to financially empower API families.<sup>5</sup> This brief summarizes the results of the survey in order to answer the following questions:

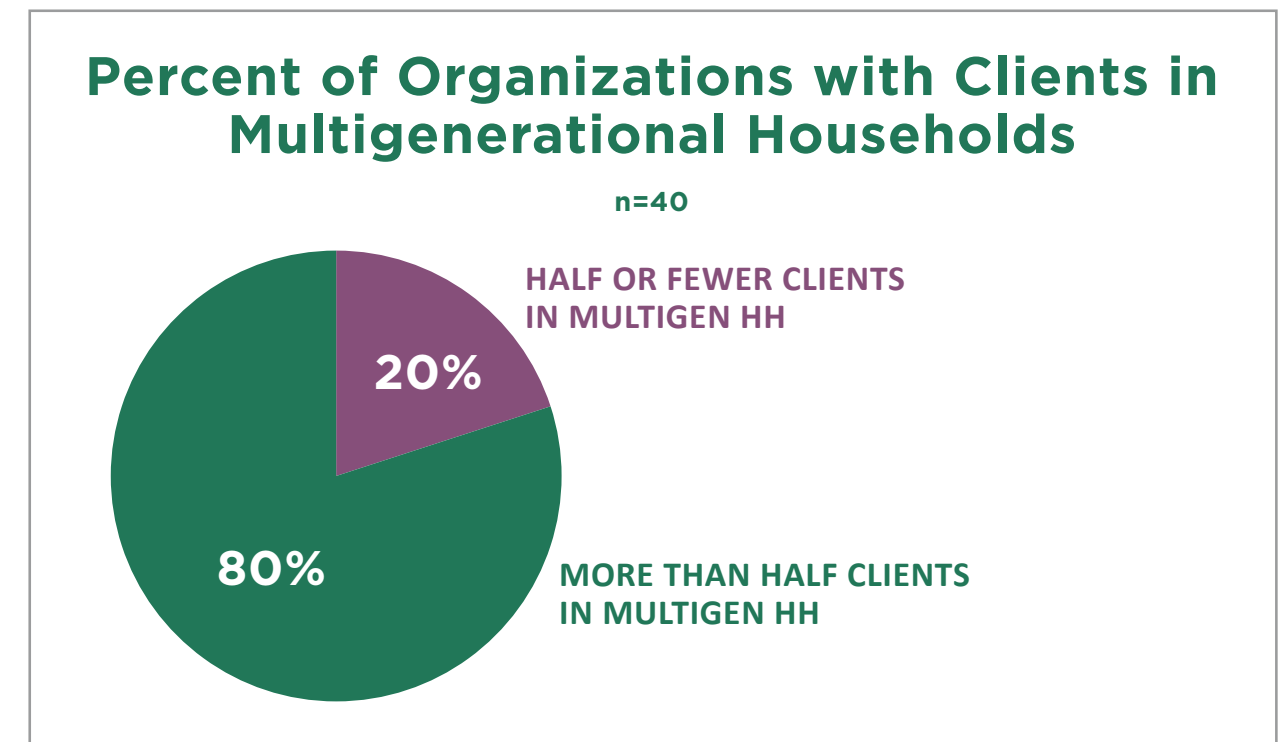
- How and to what extent are organizational leaders within API communities incorporating multigenerational and culturally responsive frameworks into financial capability programming?
- What are the organizational challenges, best practices, and needs for support identified by these leaders in delivering multigenerational and/or culturally effective approaches in client services?

<sup>a</sup> For more information about this study, see: Santos, J., Vo, A., & Lovejoy, M. (2017). *Foundations for the Future: Empowerment Economics in the Native Hawaiian Context*. Institute on Assets and Social Policy: Waltham MA.

## METHODS

In order to address these questions, IASP (in collaboration with NCAPACD, HCA, and CNHA) conducted a survey in March 2017 with practitioners offering financial capability services to API communities. The survey was distributed via email to 115 potential respondents. They included 49 members/partners of National CAPACD, and 66 Native Hawaiian stakeholders. A total of 54 respondents completed the questionnaire (for a 47% response rate), and five of these completed an in-depth interview. The majority of survey respondents represented community development and advocacy organizations offering a broad array of social services and advocacy functions. While the survey results are not generalizable to all community development organizations serving API communities, they highlight important existing patterns and perceptions among current National CAPACD members and partners that could be explored further in future research.

FIGURE 1



## THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

### FAMILIES SERVED: WHO ARE THEY?

About two thirds of responding organizations primarily work with API groups and a third work with a broader mix of racial and ethnic groups, including API members. Almost all respondents described the families they serve as low to moderate income. Multiple generations living together was common among families. A clear majority (80%) of survey respondents described more than half of their clients or members as living in multi-generational households (defined as more than two generations in the same home) [see Figure 1]. However, many multigenerational families who identified as not living together often took care of each other as if they were a shared household. Fully half of all respondents reported that a majority of their clients care for members of another generation that *do not live in the same household*.

### WEALTH BUILDING CHALLENGES & STRENGTHS

Survey respondents overwhelmingly described the financial needs of the families they serve as poorly met by mainstream fiscal institutions. Only ten percent of respondents agreed that financial institutions were responsive to the needs of these families and almost two thirds (59%) disagreed [see Figure 2]. Additionally, only one in five (20%) agreed that their clients have access to financial services they

need to build wealth, and only one in six (15%) endorsed the idea that their clients have access to financial services they want to build wealth [see Figure 3].

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*“Culturally [families] are loyal, dedicated and hard working. They work as a family unit and don’t leave anyone behind as they build and grow. Culturally, they always want more for the next generation.”*

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Respondents saw major strengths in asset building among the API families they serve, such as traditions and values that emphasized strong family and community ties, and wealth building as a shared effort. As one respondent said: “Culturally they are loyal, dedicated and hard working. They work as a family unit and don’t leave anyone behind as they build and grow. Culturally, they always want more for the next generation.” Practitioners also described the many significant barriers to wealth accumulation among families, including too-low incomes, lack of good job opportunities, and difficulty navigating complex financial systems that felt linguistically and culturally inaccessible.

## ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE: PROGRAM SERVICES & APPROACHES

### FINANCIAL CAPABILITY PROGRAMMING:

Organizations responded to the urgent fiscal needs of their clients with a wide array of financial capability services. The most commonly endorsed ones included financial education or counseling (80%), workforce development or career development (55%), assistance with opening bank accounts or credit lines (47%), and assistance with homeownership and financing (43%) [see Figure 4].

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*“We can’t do our program unless you bring the family in. And whether it be taking the message to the youth, who then takes it to the family over their family gatherings or daily dinners, or the reverse if we’re having difficulty bridging that gap, it’s the elder who says we will.”*

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### MULTIGENERATIONAL APPROACHES:

The vast majority of respondents (90%) reported that their organization uses multigenerational approaches in their programming to some extent or another [see Figure 5]. However, “multigenerational programming” appeared to be defined in very diverse ways by participants. Less than a quarter of respondents described offering multigenerational programming that fit a more classic model of working with an extended or non-nuclear family grouping. A few respondents reported that

their agencies offered programming oriented to parents or parents and their children. These interventions were seen as helping the family as a whole to function better:

***And we call ourselves family centered. What we mean by that is that we recognize clients are members of families and communities outside of the organization. And we want them to be successful not only in our programs...but in their families and communities. So, we do work with immigrant parents to provide access to supports that we think help families function better.***

The most common types of “multigenerational programming” described were *intergenerational approaches* geared to working with and across multiple generations in a community, and *age specific programs* targeting special age groups, often either youth or the elderly. Some programs strategically approached youth or the elderly to build trust with other generations in the family or the community at large: “We can’t do our program unless you bring the family in. And whether it be taking the message to the youth, who then takes it to the family over their family gatherings or daily dinners, or the reverse if we’re having difficulty bridging that gap, it’s the elder who says we will.”

FIGURE 2

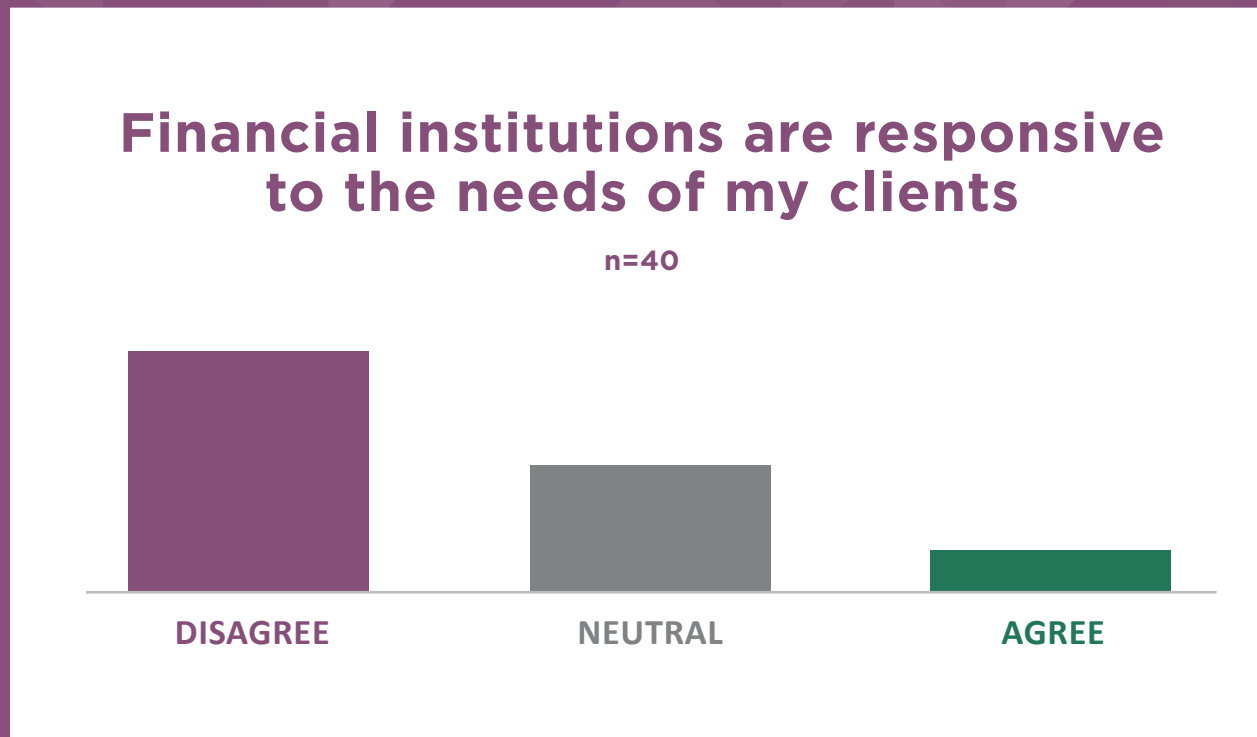


FIGURE 3

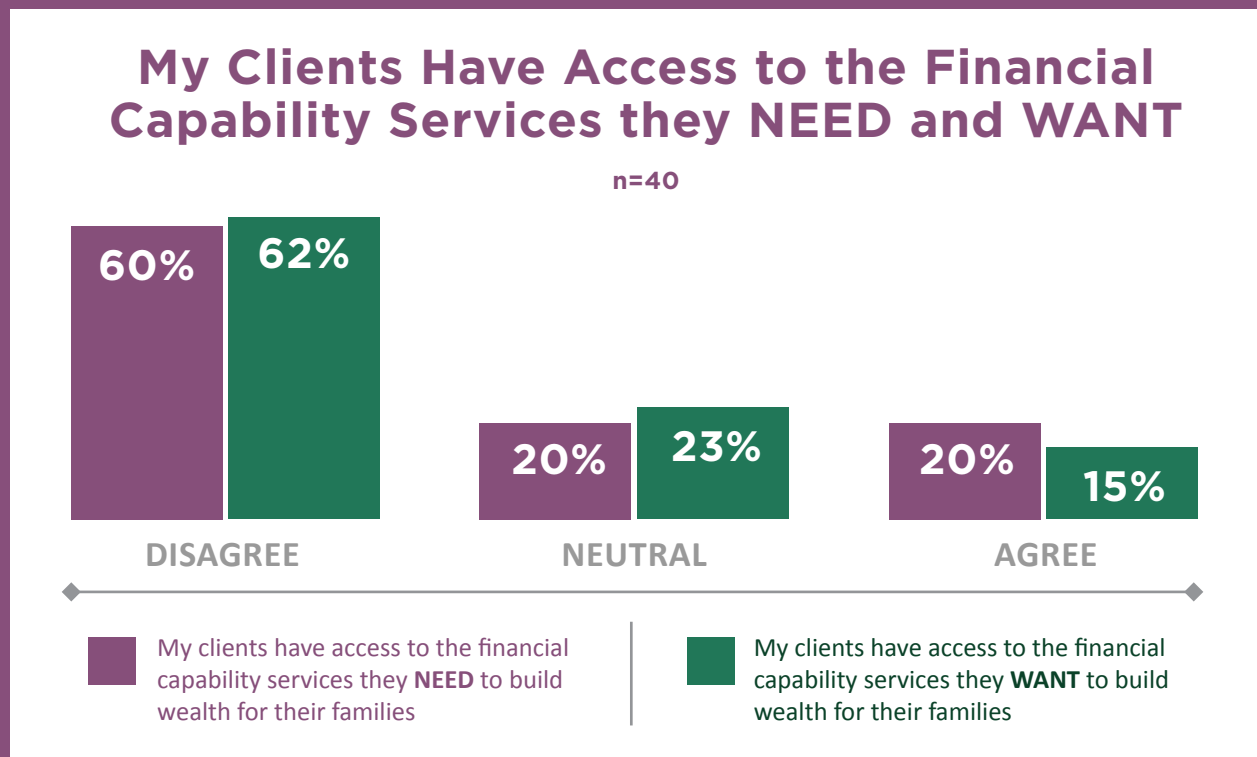


FIGURE 4

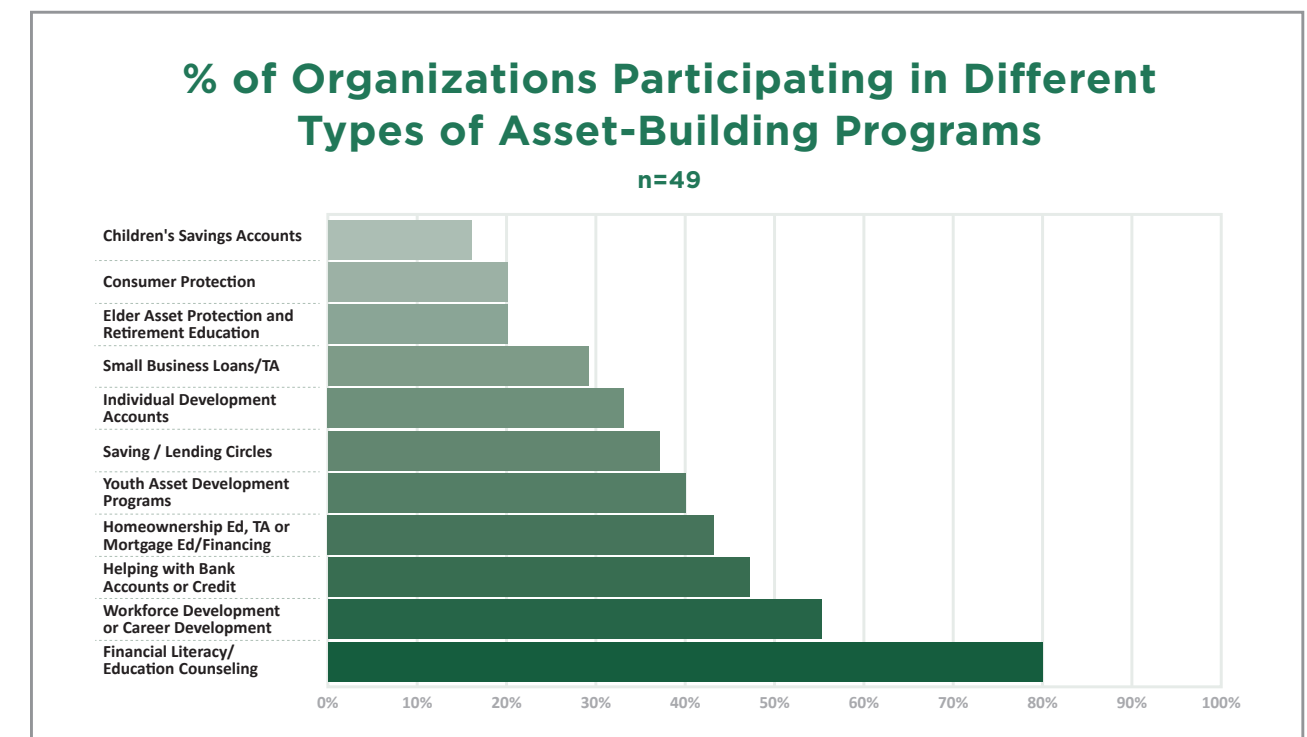
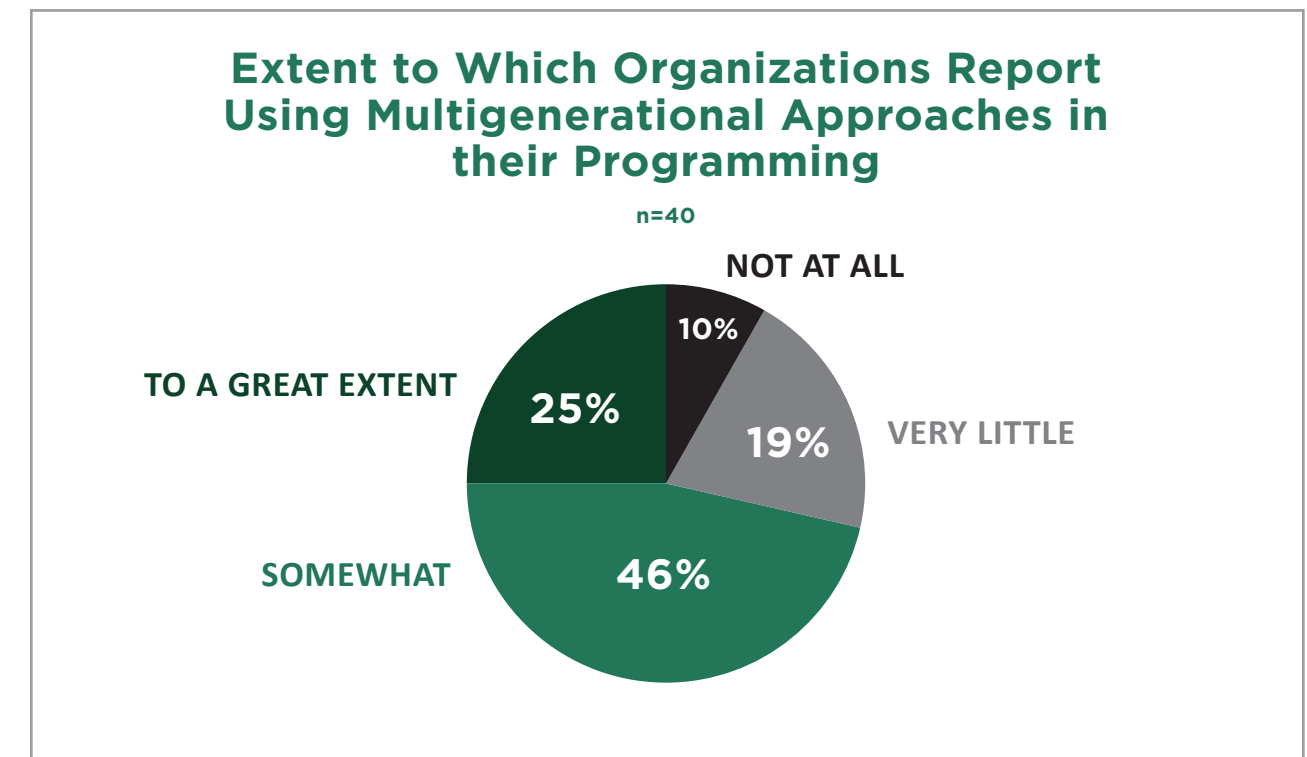


FIGURE 5



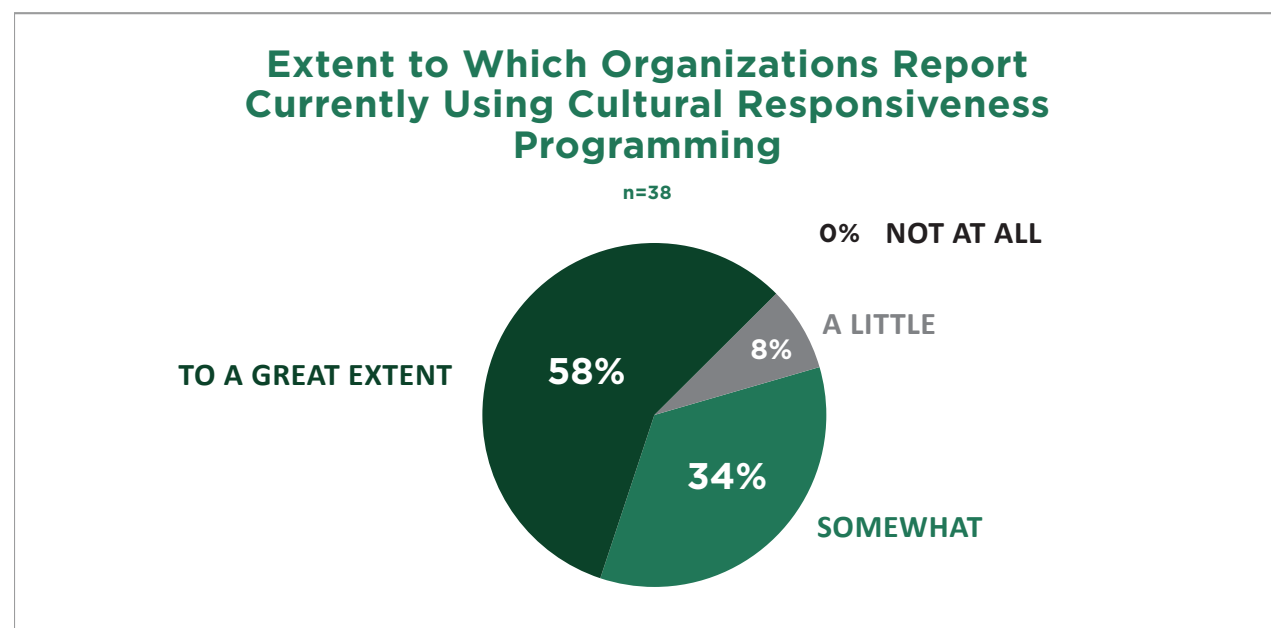
## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES:

Astonishingly, all participants reported using culturally responsive programming to one extent or another, with over half (58%) reporting that they use it “to a great extent,” about a third saying they use it “somewhat,” and the rest using it only “a little” [see Figure 6]. Significantly, almost all participants (94%) described their organizational leadership and staff as reflecting the diversity of the communities they serve.

Some participants remarked that they avoided treating culture as a side thought or convenient add-on (i.e. sprinkling non-English words in a pamphlet). Instead, these respondents made cultural responsiveness core to the very design of their programs as a whole. According to one survey participant, cultural perspectives were woven into every facet of programming and treated as an “asset” or valuable resource. Integrating culture in this manner enabled clients to feel grounded in, rather than “othered” by their ethnic identities: “All of our content is thought through from a cultural perspective....whether it’s talking about democracy or talking about institutionalized racism, all of those conversations are rooted in: how is that connected to our values as a culture?” As a part of a culturally responsive approach, a few participants spoke of the importance of incorporating “the frame of social justice and equity” into their curriculum; one which explicitly taught about the history of a group’s colonization, displacement, and oppression as a key aspect of understanding its current culture and traditions in the US context.

*“All of our content is thought through from a cultural perspective....whether it’s talking about democracy or talking about institutionalized racism, all of those conversations are rooted in: how is that connected to our values as a culture?”*

FIGURE 6



## ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES, CHALLENGES & NEEDS

### BEST PRACTICES:

Culturally relevant and multigenerational programming were the two practices most commonly identified by respondents as highly effective in helping API families build wealth. Respondents described a variety of culturally relevant strategies which worked well with API clients including, making programs “linguistically relevant,” and engaging families on a cultural level through incorporating native customs, foods, and traditional stories. These elements were described as important in grounding service delivery in a cultural context that felt meaningful to clients, as this participant describes:

***Whenever we gather we always have some basic island food, fruits and basic recipes from the islands to continue to reinforce that cultural connection. So, meetings around culturally relevant foods, blessings in the beginning of every gathering. Calling on our ancestors, the spirit forms, and of course, having the spiritual guidance for all the meetings. I think that sets the foundation for all of our programs.***

Culturally relevant programming was also described as an important access point to engage and recruit community members. One participant claimed success in motivating hard-to-reach community members to receive health screenings by offering them in the context of a popular annual cultural festival. She described the festival

“as a ‘tool’ to get our community to the doctors who have probably never gone to a doctor.” Reflecting further, she added: “I feel very strongly that without the cultural traditions, there is no health. I could do all the blood pressures and all the exams and screenings. But without the cultural foundation, the [health] messages are lost...or not taken up.” Another participant noted that her program clients – largely college-aged students – were “hungry” for information about their cultural identity and history because a lot of them don’t get that learning anywhere ...and so, it becomes a selling point for us.”

Participants also explained that embedding “cultural protocols” into the structure of meetings and program services was an effective way to build respect, and unity among group members. Here is how one leader of a community development program based in Hawai’i described the impact of such rituals:

***I brought my ukulele, and we sang, strumming my ukulele. It brings everybody together, and we all hold hands in the circle. And it’s a sense of enjoyment, I mean, it’s together, you know, talk together. And then we use this word “pono,” meaning “respectful to each other.” And we go on to the word “ho’opono-pono,” to mean “come together and listen to each other.”***

A number of participants observed

that while the specifics of implementing a culturally relevant strategy may be particular to a local community and program, the overall approach itself had great applicability across any program setting, as this participant points out: “The biggest lesson I believe that is translatable across any community is the process of using cultural values and cultural learning as a teaching tool....And I think that it’s something that you can take and then use in any other culture or community.”

Multigenerational programming was the second most frequently mentioned tactic that participants highlighted as highly effective. Programs or interventions that worked with age-specific groups, typically youth and/or the elderly, were most popular and were viewed as carrying multiplier effects. This is because distinct generational groups were regarded as important messengers who could deliver program content and resources organically through their connections with and influence on other family and community members. One participant working primarily with college-aged students put it this way: “And even in sharing resources, we often send out resources that are for whole families, and encourage our students to be the conduit in bringing resources to their families and helping to connect them.” This respondent went on to point out that a bonus of encouraging youth to talk more with their parents is that it could counteract the potential for generational alienation between parents and teens in immigrant families and create stronger family relationships.

A third important element in successful programming according

to participants is building trust with families. This factor was viewed as foundational to program efficacy, including the ability to recruit and retain families and promote a successful learning environment. Highlighting this point, one respondent stated that a key ingredient in effective asset building work is “being a face in the community that individuals can trust.” Another respondent put it this way, “well, basically in our community you will not be engaged if you’re not from the community or trusted and respected by that community.” She went on to describe how programming in her organization is intentionally designed to be delivered by community members with deep ties to their communities.

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*“And even in sharing resources, we often send out resources that are for whole families, and encourage our students to be the conduit in bringing resources to their families and helping to connect them.”*

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### ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES:

Despite their recognition of the types of programming that seemed to work (multigenerational and culturally relevant), practitioners expressed frustration with the difficulty of obtaining adequate funding and resources to implement these strategies. One participant working in the Native Hawaiian context remarked that it was challenging to get funders to recognize the value of culturally relevant financial capability programming in Native communities

**“THE BIGGEST LESSON I BELIEVE THAT IS TRANSLATABLE ACROSS ANY COMMUNITY IS THE PROCESS OF USING CULTURAL VALUES AND CULTURAL LEARNING AS A TEACHING TOOL....AND I THINK THAT IT’S SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN TAKE AND THEN USE IN ANY OTHER CULTURE OR COMMUNITY.”**

where conceptions of wealth are more community-oriented, less tangible, and harder to measure compared to Western standards:

***Native communities, even other ethnic communities, have an understanding that assets are more than financial. They are our relationships with each other, relationships with the place, relationships to culture. All these things are assets that are hard to quantify. We feel our role is to really remind people that conceptions of wealth and assets need to be broadened and that [funders] can’t get so locked onto certain metrics at the expense of these other harder to track metrics.***

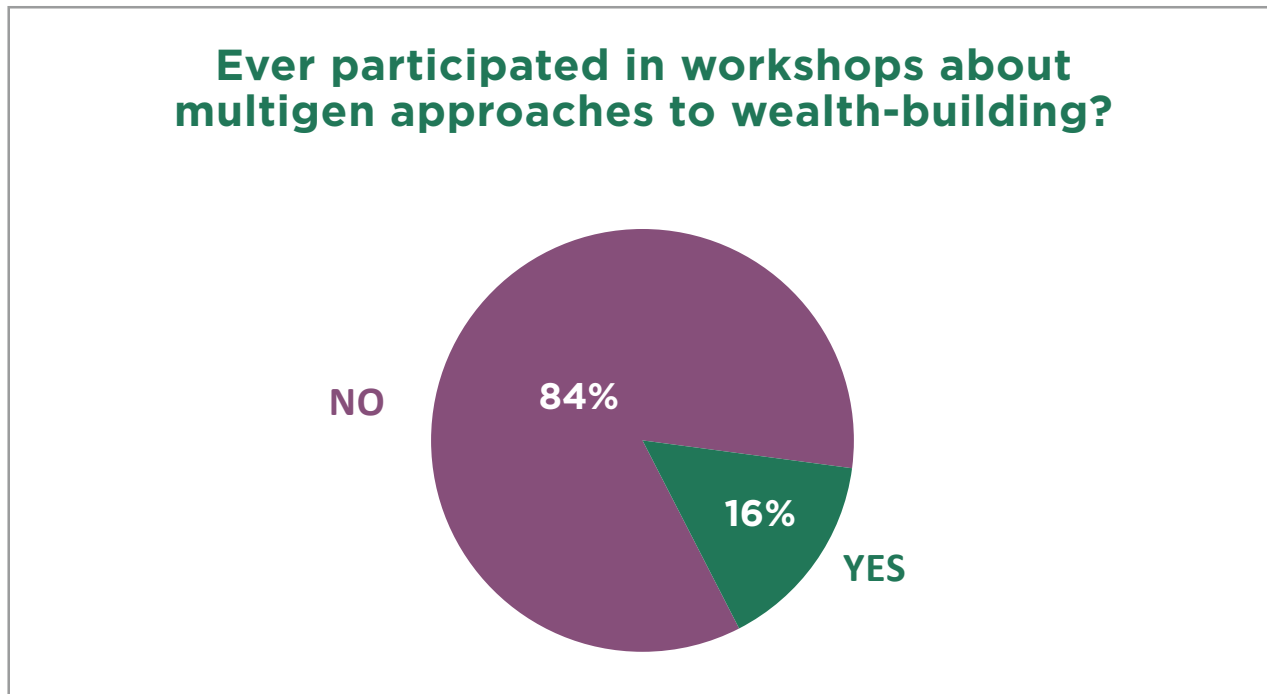
The same difficulty held true for translating the importance of multigenerational programming to funders, according to this respondent: “Even with an intergenerational approach, how do you track the impact when you’re bettering the lives of everyone in the family and not just one person’s credit score or one person’s bank account?”

Organizational leaders also mentioned the difficulty of engaging families in financial wealth building programs. Clients sometimes needed help in recognizing the value of participating in financial education programs, saving, or using various financial products. Some even perceived such activities as threatening to their very cultural survival, as this participant suggests: “There is a wide-held perception that those Pacific Islanders who have been successful in building wealth have done so by distancing themselves from their cultural and familial obligations, that financially successful Pacific Islanders are ‘whitewashed’ and therefore not exemplary models or mentors.” Related to this point, some participants highlighted the challenges of creating culturally and linguistically relevant programs for their heavily immigrant client member populations. This included “hiring financial coaches that also speak dual languages,” and “translating community articulations of wealth into capitalist/western understanding and language.”

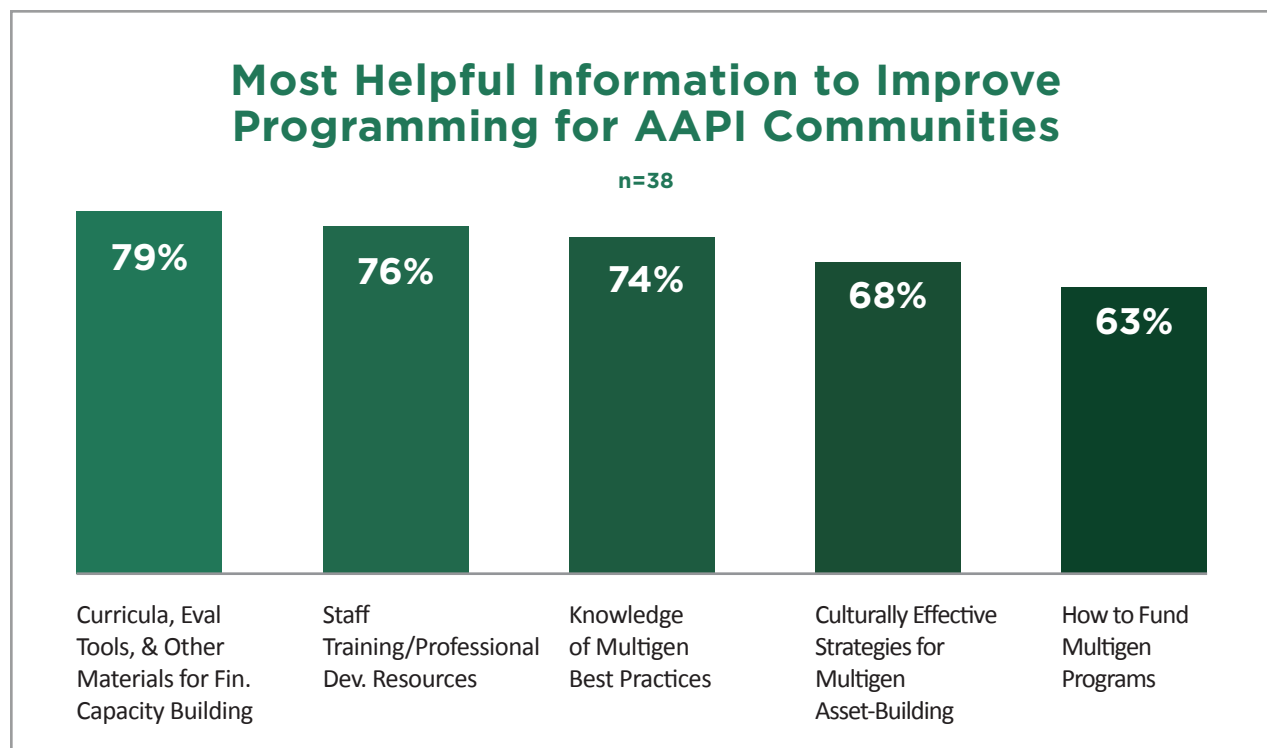
Organizations also faced major structural obstacles in their efforts to help families build assets, according to participants. These barriers included families’ inability to save due to the combination of their low incomes; high costs of living; public benefit structures that discourage or penalize savings; financial system complexity; and, the lack of state/public supports for their client’s needs.



**FIGURE 7**



**FIGURE 8**



**ORGANIZATIONAL NEED FOR SUPPORTS:**

Participants expressed a strong desire and need for additional supports in adopting multigenerational and culturally effective approaches. Eighty four percent of participants had never participated in workshops on multigenerational programming [Figure 7], while 74% wanted more knowledge of best practices in this area [Figure 8]. Sixty eight percent of respondents wanted more information about culturally effective strategies in multigenerational wealth building, and 63% wanted to know how to fund multigenerational programming [Figure 8]. Respondents were also keen to acquire more information on effective curricula, evaluation tools and other materials for financial capacity building work (79%), as well as more staff training and professional development resources (76%) [Figure 8].

In open-ended responses, the interest in supports for multigenerational programming centered on a desire for more and better information on how to cater to different generational groups (youth, elders), either within the same household or in the community. API organizational leaders also commonly expressed a desire for knowledge about how to develop culturally effective programs, including making them linguistically appropriate and culturally-tailored to the needs and learning styles of clients.

## PROMISING DIRECTIONS

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In conclusion, it appears that organizational leaders already understand the importance of culturally relevant, multigenerational programming, and are implementing these strategies to one extent or another. We speculate that this awareness emerges organically from the lived experiences of API families, and the recognition that these approaches resonate with and inspire their clients. However, currently each program appears to be largely working on its own to create these practices – effectively reinventing the wheel – without sufficient awareness of which approaches have had the best track record of efficacy.

Our findings suggest a need for the development of collective spaces – conferences, online discussion boards, inter-organizational partnerships – where practitioners can share insights about the processes and approaches which are most effective and culturally relevant in promoting wealth building across different API communities. Alongside such initiatives, research and evaluation of existing programs is needed to grow a nation-wide bank of comparative data on best practices in this area. Such a database could offer systematic insights and recommendations for culturally responsive financial capability strategies which appear to be effective either within and/or across particular API groups. In a virtuous cycle, these combined efforts could then be used to identify and advocate for better and more targeted funding for financial capability and asset building programs.

The findings from this brief reveal that practitioners are already doing valuable and creative work to respond to the financial challenges of API families in culturally relevant ways. We believe that the existing but still nascent work in this area offers promising new directions for supporting the economic stability and wellbeing of API families.

## ENDNOTES

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