



CALIFORNIA
ASSET
BUILDING
COALITION

Valuing Who We Are at Work

Research Brief | NOVEMBER 2022 Preliminary Findings

“Equity Acumen: Understanding How Systems Shape Lived Experiences”

By Melody Ng
CABC Racial Economic Justice Fellow

[Valuing Who We Are at Work](#) is a CABC research project exploring how personal experiences shape the way asset building professionals engage in the work. This research reveals the value of advocacy centered in lived experience and how to better support individuals and organizations advocating in this way.

The findings presented in these briefs reflect the experiences of 51 CABC members and allies that were shared through in-depth interviews.

Lived experiences have been increasingly viewed as a valuable commodity by institutions in the asset building community. Though it has not been well documented, there is evidence to suggest that [advocates and other professionals have used them](#) to design, implement, and evaluate programs

systems of exclusion — in society has created the outcomes they see in their own and other people’s lives. Moreover, of the people that fully comprehend how systems have shaped their lived experiences, few arrive at that understanding immediately.

Understanding how systems have shaped lived experiences is called **equity acumen**. Those who have equity acumen understand that how much power a person has — where they exist on the spectrum of privilege and marginalization — is a relative state that changes with each room, depending on (1) who else is in the room and (2) the stated and the unspoken rules that govern the dynamics in it.

But a person with lived experiences does not automatically develop equity acumen. It is an analytical lens that takes time, labor, and skill to develop. Many interviewees that demonstrated equity acumen shared that they did not immediately understand how systems shaped their early experiences until later in life. Usually, they developed equity acumen after exposure to some combination of community social justice education, formal education, and work experiences. A few examples include:

- ★ Some interviewees were unaware that they belonged to marginalized groups until they left the communities where they were raised (e.g. to attend college). They had no true sense of their marginalized status within wider society, since they belonged to the majority (Latinx or low-income rural) and were mostly not exposed to other ethnic or socioeconomic groups in the

and learning from them about systemic racism.

- ★ As young people, various interviewees sensed that they did not have the necessary tools to answer the consuming questions they had about their lived experiences. They chose areas of study during school and specific careers because they wanted to better understand their lived experiences. These questions include but are not limited to: *Why did my parents die so young? Why, even with the same upbringing, was I able to ascend to the middle class while the rest of my family was not? Why were my educated parents unable to start a business after immigrating to the U.S.?* They pursued schooling and job opportunities that would expose them to the history, politics, and policies that shaped the outcomes they saw in their own and others lives.

Equity acumen has allowed many advocates to reflect on their lived experiences and to recognize the systems (history, politics, and policies) that have shaped them — including their sense of rights, how they engage with other people and institutions, and their expectations of institutions. The evidence suggests that professionals need to develop equity acumen before they can effectively use their lived experiences to advocate for and build out programs, policies, and key organizational strategies that meaningfully serve communities.

Stay tuned for future briefs and the full report (expected Fall 2022).
