

Mel King Institute for Community Building Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The Mel King Institute for Community Building fosters vibrant and thriving Massachusetts communities by advancing the skills, knowledge and leadership ability of professional practitioners and volunteer leaders in the community development field. The Institute has demonstrated its commitment to programmatic learning and improvement by conducting evaluations of its work on a regular basis. To supplement the evaluation findings garnered through the day-of-surveys collected after each course, the Institute commissioned this evaluation in 2015-2016.

The goals of the evaluation were to learn from participants and Executive Directors about the impact the training programs have had on individuals and the organizations they work for. Data for the evaluation was gathered through confidential telephone interviews with 22 individuals – staff, Executive Directors and board members.

Highlights of Key Findings

- The Institute continues to provide high quality, affordable, and convenient training to practitioners in the community development field.
- Individuals who attend workshops leave with practical skills and knowledge they can readily apply to their work.
- Evidence exists that confidence has grown as a result of participation in programs, as has improvements in job performance to some degree.
- The King Institute is an excellent vehicle that supports an organization's commitment to professional development and may contribute to increasing staff retention although it is difficult to measure.
- Organizational leaders shared anecdotal evidence that the King Institute has had some impact on improving their organizations but these are not documented or easily attributed to training courses. Organizational impact is inclusive.
- The King Institute is helping to build peer networks, advancing professional development and sharing best practices across the community development field.
- There are areas where the King Institute can further add value to the field by supporting professional development in a more concerted manner, providing an annual calendar of training programs, offering more advanced courses and more tailored workshops for board members, and ensuring that course content matches participant expectations.
- To support implementation of best practices, the King Institute should consider adding components to each course to help participants plan their follow-up steps, encourage trainers to follow the course with additional tools and networking options, and consider ways to support follow-up coaching to tailor the lessons to organizational circumstances.

Introduction

The Mel King Institute for Community Building fosters vibrant and thriving Massachusetts communities by advancing the skills, knowledge and leadership ability of professional practitioners and volunteer leaders in the community development field. The King Institute leverages collaborative educational partnerships that increase access, encourage innovation, and promote and institutionalize systemic success. The Institute is designed to bring community development professionals and volunteers the skills they need to be effective in their positions in the community. To reach its goals, the Institute sponsors trainings, serves as a clearing house, and provides technical assistance.

The Institute is committed to evaluation and continual learning and as such, developed a theory of change illustrated in a Logic Model during its first year and has evaluated its desired outcomes each year. In April 2015, the Institute revised its logic model to better align with its current work. For every course, participants are asked to complete a “day-of-survey” to evaluate the content, approach, and lessons learned that may have applicability to the participant’s professional development and to his/her organization’s ability to reach outcomes. These surveys are tabulated and analyzed at the end of each program year, and reviewed by the Steering Committee.

To supplement the surveys, the King Institute decided to conduct a more in-depth evaluation in 2015 - 2016. The goals of the evaluation are to:

- Identify the impact of the courses on individuals who participated;
- Explore potential impact on the organizations sending participants to training, and on their ability to reach higher outcomes in the community;
- Learn more about the role the Institute plays in advancing professional development and sharing best practices in the broader field; and
- Identify potential areas for the Institute to consider to strengthen its work.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation collected confidential feedback from program participants and Executive Directors through telephone interviews. A total of 22 individuals participated out of a list of 26 potential interviewees (the balance of four individuals did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.) See *Appendix A* for a list of interviewees and *Appendix B* for a list of interview questions. Interviewees were sent a list of the courses they had taken, and Executive Directors were provided with a list of courses for members of their staff and board. All interviews are confidential. The report aggregates the findings. Quotes are used to illustrate a point and are not attributed.

The evaluation initially planned to organize focus groups of participants and of board leaders. However, insufficient numbers of individuals agreed to attend and therefore the focus groups were cancelled.

Evaluation Findings

The evaluation confirmed the findings from previous evaluations, namely that the Mel King Institute is a highly regarded program that offers a positive experience for staff and leaders from community development organizations. The trainings are high quality, convenient, and affordable. The topics for the courses are relevant and in tune with the emerging trends and challenges facing the field.

Individual Impact

Participants were asked to comment on whether the training contributed to individuals gaining knowledge and skills and to whether their confidence grew and job performance improved as a result. Similarly, Executive Directors were asked their perspective on this question not only for themselves if they had attended workshops, but also for other members of their staff or board who may have participated.

Knowledge Gained

Staff, board, and executive leaders confirmed that the trainings have helped to build the knowledge and skills of those who attend. This finding is consistent with those that are generated by the day-of-survey forms. In general, participants attested to the fact that attending the trainings help to broaden their perspective on the field as well as learn specific content related to the course. The courses tend to be highly practical in nature which aides in gaining knowledge that is applicable to the work. Participants who took classes in subject areas that did not pertain to their current job reported an enhanced understanding of the whole organization and a greater ability to participate in discussions about strategic issues. With regard to specific skills gained, participants provided these examples:

- Improved facilitation and meeting management techniques
- Stronger staff management and supervision skills
- Active listening skills
- Improved real estate project management skills
- Deeper understanding of real estate development for board members
- Stronger and more effective grantwriting skills
- Greater skills in fundraising and knowing how to capitalize on the CITC program
- Understanding CDC finances for board members to further help them in their fiduciary roles
- Increased understanding of community process for board members
- Increased understanding for board members in their roles as ambassadors

"I learned how to manage meetings. Now I can go into other situations even if I don't know the content as well and be able to facilitate a meeting." Participant

"I learned about engaging constituents and the different between community input and community engagement which is more meaningful." Participant

Impactful Courses

Interviewees were asked if there were particular courses that had more impact than others on their growth. The King Institute reportedly does a good job of tailoring courses to the needs of the community development field and in particular, providing technical and practical trainings. From the list of courses provided, there were a considerable number of interviewees who either could not recall the course content or impact at all, or had only a vague memory of taking the course, which in and of itself is a finding. However, there were several courses that were mentioned a number of times by a participants as having an impact.

Some courses mentioned included¹:

- Grantwriting
- Leadership Development Institute
- Real Estate courses
- Facilitation
- Census data
- Driving a closing
- Asset management
- Logic models
- Fundraising
- Project management

A few courses received more “mixed reviews.” While some felt that that the course “Technical Strategies to Ensure Full Participation in Multi-lingual Meetings” was beneficial, a few people specifically named this course as not as successful as others. Those interviewees reported that the course was too focused on equipment/ technology, rather than the facilitation skills needed to engage people in multi-lingual meetings. Going forward, it was suggested that this topic be incorporated into other trainings, not only as a stand-alone course.

Another course that had mixed reviews was one focused on supervision. Some felt the course was not practical enough which was a barrier to them being able to implement the lessons learned but others thought it helped staff to build supervisory skills. Other courses that were deemed not as valuable as others were described as too basic – *“The Hiring Staff course wasn’t on the mark. We thought it was too basic. It wasn’t advertised correctly.”* A similar comment was made about a course focused on understanding financial statements for CDCs which was also described as too basic for some. A few respondents noted that not all of the course content matches the description which leads to expectations not being met by the participants. One participant who felt the course did not match the advertisement suggested that the trainers need to make a good assessment of the knowledge of the audience before going into the training.

¹ Often interviewees could not recall the exact name of the course.

Confidence and Job Performance Improvements

For nearly all of those interviewed, there was an increase in confidence to do their work, and to more broadly speaking, engage in their organization's community development mission. This was especially true for participants who were either new to the field, or who took courses outside of their job description area, but increases in confidence was also reported for others who participated.

Trainings added context to the work, helping participants to understand the bigger picture. In specific areas such as understanding census data, or using facilitation skills, the courses added value and boosted confidence in areas where the participant may have already had some knowledge but needed additional skills and confirmation that they were headed in the right direction. Others also talked about greater confidence in training community members to tell their own story by learning techniques for doing so in the workshops.

"I was just starting in the field of affordable housing. The course helped paint a fuller picture of the industry. I am not a 'housing person' but now I have the confidence to participate in the conversations in the office." Participant

"Each course has value. The courses make me better because they make me smarter. They help to validate my gut on things which bolsters my confidence in the direction I was headed." Participant

A few interviewees either felt that confidence had not increased or it was hard to judge. In part this is due to the fact it is challenging to attribute growth to one or two particular courses alone. As one Executive Director noted, *"We've had Americorps attend sessions for several years. For sure they have grown over the course of the year, but I can't say it was related to a specific session. They might say it [contributed to building confidence] but I don't see it tied necessarily to the sessions for sure."*

When asked if the skills gained and renewed confidence helped contribute to improvements in job performance, many the participants concurred that it had such as in the areas of becoming a better supervisor or facilitator. One participant reflected that she had *"grown exponentially."*

For others job performance was not necessarily correlated to the Institute. Comments reflected the challenge of measurement on this issue. *"Job improvement is a work in progress."*

"Yes but not as much as I would have liked. Some of the information/ techniques have not jelled yet. Job performance improvement has more to do with being on the job and gaining experience rather than the trainings." Participant

Organizational Impact

Measuring the impact on the organizations and on the community is challenging. For the most part, staff, executive leaders, and board members had a general sense that there was an impact on their organization and some anecdotal evidence was shared. For example, staff have increased their capacity to raise funds and improve financial management reporting. As a result, organizations are more effective at communicating with donors, and raising more funds to support their work.

Other participants provided feedback about ways that the King Institute is fostering organizational change. For example, it was noted by a number of people that it is helpful to go to seminars with other staff or board members from their organizations. This facilitates team building and the ability to strategize about how to implement the lessons learned after the training.

However, while some organizations are investing in outcome measurement systems for their own work, the King Institute evaluation systems are not geared to collecting specific metrics for organization or community-wide impact. Organizational leaders and participants had a hard time responding to this question with specific examples of impact that correlated to the King Institute's training. A common refrain to this question was, *"yes but it's hard to track,"* or *"I want to say yes but I'm not sure I can,"* or *"no, not yet, but we have started to gain some good ideas... it's gradual."*

Given this feedback, it is inconclusive as to whether the King Institute has had an impact on an organization's ability to reach higher outcomes in the community. One leader summed up the conclusion by saying, *"No. It is a small win here. The King Institute has had a personal impact on the staff who participated, but not on the organization as a whole."*

Professional Development

Interviewees were asked if the King Institute has had an impact on the organizations' commitment to professional development. The general consensus is that the King Institute is an excellent vehicle for helping an organization fulfill its' commitment to professional development by providing affordable, easy to access high quality training programs. The King Institute supports an organization in reaching these goals, but according to interviewees, it has not played a role in either fostering this commitment or helping organizations to create a plan for professional development.²

For Executive Directors who were already supportive of their staff attending training session, seeing the staff return and report benefits from the training is an affirmation of the importance s/he already placed on professional development activities.

"I rely on the Mel King Institute as a way to deliver staff development opportunities close by, reasonably affordable, very consistent quality and consistent to our size organization and our mission." Executive Director

Long term professional development planning is a continuing need. Going forward, interviewees suggested that the King Institute increase its role in helping organizations to plan for professional development in general, and tie those goals in specific with King Institute curriculum where feasible.

² The organizations who participated in this evaluation already demonstrated their commitment in this regard and therefore this sample of leaders is not reflective of the full range of groups in the community.

Staff Retention

Interviewees were asked if the King Institute has had an impact on their ability to attract or retain staff, volunteers, or board members. As with the broader question of organizational wide impact, attributing staff retention to the King Institute is hard to measure. Executive Directors reported that the King Institute has helped them to create an environment that is supportive of staff learning, and so while they may not be able to say with certainty that the existence of the Institute helps them to attract or retain staff, it is a contributing factor to organization's ability to keep staff energized and growing. One Executive Director reported, *"Yes I feel it has had an impact but it is not documented. The better your staff is trained and understand their job, the retention numbers will increase."* For others, they reported that the King Institute has *"not touched us in this way,"* or *"not impacted retention but it might going forward."*

The Role of the Mel King Institute

Interviewees confirmed that the King Institute is having an impact on advancing professional development, staff capacity, and cultivating best practices. Throughout the evaluation, staff and leaders pointed to evidence that the King Institute is promoting sharing of knowledge and best practices. Whether the participants remain at their organization or eventually leave, leaders pointed to the fact that participants then take the skills they gained to other positions within the community, thereby helping to strengthen the field more generally.

Peer to Peer Networks

Most respondents agreed that the King Institute is helping to foster peer to peer connections and building networks. *"My rolodex has definitely grown."* As in past evaluations, a number of interviewees noted that they often pair training with attendance at MACDC peer group meetings which helps to further interaction among practitioners and sharing of lessons and best practices. In general, participants appreciate the opportunity to learn from their peers and share ideas during and after the sessions whether they go to the MACDC peer groups or not.

Board members concurred that the sessions they attended were beneficial in meeting with other board members and hearing about different practices and perspectives. In other cases, participants commented that they benefited when there was a mix of board and staff at training sessions.

"This is definitely one of the pillars of the experience. Networking is key -- learning about resources and meeting people in classes. I've kept up with people I met." Participant

Some respondents felt that the training sessions had not necessarily impacted their peer networks, largely because they were already well ensconced in the community and knew a lot of leaders already.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

Interviewees were asked to provide recommendations for how the King Institute might strengthen its work. Those included:

Curriculum Planning

In addition to conducting periodic assessments and seeking feedback on the curriculum as the King Institute currently does, interviewees would like the Institute to assess needs on a more regular basis. One person suggested that the Institute put a link on the bottom of the newsletter whereby participants could give feedback on trends or issues that would be relevant to upcoming training on a more going basis. Further, the Institute should consider asking the instructors to be more explicit about the course content and suggest the skill levels best served by the course. Moreover, instructors could survey participants before the course to ensure that both the instructor and the participants have the same expectations about course outcomes.

Annual Calendar

Interviewees all agreed that they would like to see the King Institute develop an annual calendar of courses. This would facilitate a deeper tie between professional development planning and staff workplans and personnel evaluations. Some reported that it is difficult to align professional development with the actual work of the staff without knowing what courses might be coming up. Interviewees recognize this is not necessarily an easy task, but encouraged the Institute to consider how to make this a reality. An Executive Director stated it this way: *“An annual calendar would help with planning and furthering professional development. Supervisors could plan ahead with their staff to match professional development opportunities with annual workplans and goals that are set that follow an evaluation.”*

Professional development support

Interviewees are aware that the King Institute is interested in fostering professional development among organizations. Several people suggested that in addition to the annual calendar, the Institute should consider organizing a session for mid-level managers to help them think about the year ahead and plan professional development tied to workplan goals for their team.

Courses for Board Members

Both Executive Directors and board members interviewed would like to see more courses geared specifically to building the capacity of boards of directors, and board members individually. Topics might include: understanding financials and fiduciary responsibilities, best practices in governance, developing a culture of inquiry, and how to engage all members in dialogue and practical action. Executive Directors noted that it is challenging to consistently engage board members to attend the sessions. With this in mind, courses for board members may need to be shorter, on the weekends or evenings, or other ways to maximize attendance.

Advanced Courses

As in past evaluations, interviewees are requesting the King Institute develop more courses for senior level staff and in general more advanced topics. Although they would like the Institute to continue to offer the basics for newer staff, for those who have participated in a number of courses to-date, higher levels of content are desired.

Course Follow-Up

Implementation of best practices is generally considered to be one of the more challenging aspects of capacity building. As such, interviewees made a number of suggestions to help further their ability for implementation:

- Structure in time at the end of the course to discuss follow up and implementation strategies. The Institute should consider asking the instructors to provide formal follow up including sending additional articles or ways to tailor the lessons to individual organizations or send a follow up “tool kit” with implementation suggestions and resources.
- Create forums, online platforms or other interactive ways for participants to share ideas after the course.
- Share participant contact information after the course.
- Support coaching as a follow up to the course to help with implementation.

Evaluation Support

Executive Directors noted that many groups don’t have a way to assess the impact of the training for their own organizational purposes. It was suggested that the King Institute could develop a tool that organizations could use to assess whether the trainings are having an impact on their organizations and their communities. Feedback could then be given to the Institute in support of future curriculum development. This might also help supervisors to take this information and incorporate it into other activities geared towards professional development.

Other suggestions

- Make more workshops accessible to grassroots partners
- Always make courses accessible by public transportation
- Ensure the courses are as practical and interactive as possible
- Offer more short courses in webinar format
- Develop mentoring programs for emerging leaders in the field not covered by programs offered through the Alliance
- Support succession planning beyond the hiring of a new Executive Director to include a focus on building the capacity of emerging leaders

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Mel King Institute for Community Building continues to provide high quality, affordable, and convenient training programs for community development organizations. Interviewees concurred that the training has had an impact on the staff and leaders who attend. Skills and knowledge have been built in a wide array of areas which has contributed to greater confidence, and to some degree job performance improvements.

While leaders believe that these improvements have helped strengthen their organizations and their ability to reach higher outcomes in the community, these kinds of outcomes could not be confirmed by the evaluation. Despite that, all of those who participated in the evaluation felt strongly that the King Institute is contributing to advancing professional development and sharing best practices among community development leaders in the field.

Respondents recommended that the King Institute consider how they might increase their role in helping organizations develop and implement professional development plans that are aligned with organizational goals and staff workplans. This would greatly be enhanced by an annual calendar of courses. Further, follow up from the courses by the instructor or by the Institute with additional tools, shared communication methods such as online forums, or other means to aide in implementation of best practices would be beneficial. Other recommendations included developing more courses for board members and more advanced curriculum options.

Finally, organizations would benefit from greater help from the King Institute in learning how to assess the impact of the training programs on their organizations. With their own insights into these kinds of results, feedback can be given on a more regular basis to the Institute which can in turn, support targeted curriculum development that meets the evolving needs of the field.

The Institute should be congratulated for another successful year in delivering quality programming that supports the community development field.

Appendix A

Interviewees

Executive Directors

- Donna Brown, South Boston CDC
- Jay Coburn, Community Development Partnership
- Sheila Cuddy, Quaboag Valley CDC
- Andrew DeFranza, Harborlight Community Partners
- Gail Latimore, Codman Square NDC
- Danny LeBlanc, Somerville Community Corporation
- Mickey Northcutt, North Shore CDC
- Jeanne Pinado, Madison Park CDC
- Carol Ridge-Martinez, Allston Brighton CDC
- Deborah Ruhe, Just-A-Start Corporation

Board members

- Jay Bry, NewVue Communities
- Andrew Kerivan (NY based organization)

Staff

- Juan Bonilla, Lawrence CommunityWorks
- Charise Canales, Worcester Common Ground
- Hakim Cunningham, Transportation for Massachusetts
- Sharon Fosbury, The Neighborhood Developers
- Adam Gibbons, Consultant
- Peter Graham, Just-A-Start
- Vanny Huot, The Neighborhood Developers
- Beya Jimenez, Homeowers Rehab Inc.
- May Lui, Asian CDC
- Karen Narefsky, Somerville Community Corporation

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Individual Impact

1. What knowledge or skills have you or the staff gained from the MKI trainings?
2. Has job performance improved?
3. Is there any greater level of confidence among those who have participated in training programs?
4. Are there particular courses that you feel have had more impact than others? Are there courses you would suggest have been of less value?

Organizational Impact

1. How have the lessons learned from training, web resources, forums, or other means impacted your organization as a whole? Has there been an impact on your ability to reach outcomes in the community?
2. Has participation in MKI changed your organization's commitment or focus on staff professional development?
3. Has participation in MKI impacted your organization's ability to retain effective, knowledgeable staff, volunteers, or board members?
4. Were there any particular courses or sequence of courses, or other factors that had the greatest impact on your organization? Where there courses that you felt to be of less value to your organization overall?

Role of MKI

1. Taken as a whole, what role do you think MKI plays in advancing the professional development and capacity of organizations and leaders in the community development field?
2. To what degree does MKI foster shared knowledge and best practices?
3. Have connections staff or board members made through MKI been sustained? Have those connections contributed to your organization's ability to build your capacity long term?
4. What suggestions do you have for how MKI might strengthen its work?