



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

Alumni Program: Looking to the Future

Over the course of winter 2007-8, we hired a consultant to interview a subset of retreat and workshop participants about their experiences in our Whole Thinking program. She spent part of each interview asking alumni how they would like us to help them make changes in their work following their retreat or workshop experience. Following is a short report summarizing their responses, with some ideas provided by the consultant as to how we might move forward. Tell us what you think! Are there ideas you would add? Ideas that sound great? Ideas that don't sound helpful? Email us with your thoughts at: info@wholecommunities.org.

Although almost all workshop interviewees and most retreat interviewees were able to rattle off a long wish-list of activities when asked how CWC could provide additional alumni support, there was a small core of retreat alumni who felt that the retreats need little follow up. These people felt that the retreats do exactly what they are intended to do by opening people up to a new way of thinking about their work and personal lives and about their relationship with others and with themselves.

“I don't think there needs to be any kind of great intentional next steps – it's more giving people a lens or perspective on their work.”

“...the role of CWC is to inspire and make you think, and not to really provide specific tools for getting things done where you live or work.”

“I think it really is that you go through the process, you grasp the pebble from the master's hand, and then you leave. There might be ways for being useful, but for me, I wouldn't use a 24-hour care line, it's more of an internal thing.”

In this spirit, the current mailings and gatherings facilitated by CWC create an adequate feeling of support and provide inspiration through glimpses into what others are doing, and this is sufficient.

Enhanced communication

Many agreed that the role of facilitating information exchange and occasional connection was an appropriate one for CWC to play – and they had suggestions for enhancing this role, including:

- Include more stories of alumni work in the “Whole Thinking Journal” – maybe encourage teams of alumni to get together to write articles on what they are working on and how they are addressing challenges.
- Film a video clip of someone on staff sharing a story or someone who has been through a retreat talking about how it's changed their work.
- Do a DVD with a collection of these things.

- Provide rotating content on the website that involves video blogs by staff, periodic video or textual blogs by people who have been through the program – how it changes what they do. It’s constantly refreshed and updated portals back into the experience.
- Have a regular feature on the website – Caleb and Jean talking about local food, the land stewards talking about what they’re doing, etc.

Multiple workshop packages

While most people were very satisfied with their workshop experience, a number of them had suggestions for variations on the workshop, mainly for audiences to whom they are trying to appeal. For example, a one day version for people who can’t spare two; a workshop with slightly different approach (less preacher/choir); and one less “tailored” for the land trust community and applicable to other sectors and individuals interested in the Whole Thinking concepts.

Retreat location

Like the workshops, many of the same people who loved their experience had suggestions for doing it differently to reach a broader range of people. “They need to come down from Knoll Farm and do more of this work in locations that would allow more people to be exposed.” In particular, retreat suggestions focused on holding Whole Thinking retreats in places other than Knoll Farm. The majority of these suggestions were for a regional approach, which interviewees argued would be more focused, relevant, and accessible. Ideas interviewees shared included:

An “implementation center” in Chesapeake Bay area where organizations and communities can engage in values based inquiry can happen

Programs that focus on the brewing potential on the west coast, particularly the Bay Area

Programs that focus more on the reality of the west – Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, etc – where questions and solutions around land are much different than they are in the northeast.

Alumni connection

One of interviewees’ main requests for support was for more connection with other alumni. A role of “network manager” could be played by CWC at various levels of investment and intensity. Some examples include:

Case studies

Provide more examples of alumni and others doing “Whole Communities” work. The desire for these examples may be satisfied with the CWC “What is a Whole Communities” book currently in production. This book will include case studies of organizations involved in work that crosses boundaries and engages a broad based constituency.

Mentoring and peer-to-peer exchange

Even more than case studies, interviewees were interested in exchanging with experienced colleagues, particularly those in the same region, about developing new partnerships and approaches. To achieve this, CWC might help to develop a mentoring program where less experienced organizations could be paired with and learn from a more experienced role model or mentor. Of course, there would need to be some kind of incentive for the mentor organization to make this program viable. Exchange could also be facilitated between and among peer organizations, or organizations with similar levels of experience.

Alumni exchange data base

One way that interviewees felt CWC could help with facilitating this kind of learning was to develop an alumni data base organized by geographic and programmatic areas. If someone was interested in working with ranchers, they could search “ranchers,” if someone was interested in people working in western Wyoming, they could search that and if they were interested in organizations in western Wyoming working with ranchers, they could search that.

Conference

Another suggestion for facilitating exchange was to organize a “Whole Communities” conference, with sessions led by alumni on various topics organizations are currently grappling with, such as “hiring a diverse workforce” or “getting your board on board” or “conflict resolution between non-traditional partners” or “facilitating dialogue between open space and social justice organizations.”

Nominations

The importance of the nomination process, and actively encouraging alumni to take part in it, was underscored by several interviewees. Some reported that the retreats are often in their mind when meeting new people and others mentioned that they use the nomination process as a means for building a critical mass of like-minded colleagues and practitioners in their communities and organizations. One person suggested that CWC provide explicit guidance to nominating alumni on how to use their nominations in this way. Another interviewee expressed a bit of concern that the sentence in this year’s nomination form that reads, “Someone who’s work is unconnected to land is unlikely to find the program relevant ...” may send a message that the retreat is only relevant for people directly involved in land conservation.

Self-facilitated gatherings

Finally, CWC could encourage alumni in different geographies to gather periodically and, perhaps using dialogue techniques, have conversations that explore questions such as: how are we implementing this work in our lives and work, what can we do differently as leaders in the movement in our different areas? Doing this might entail CWC identifying and following up with “sparkplugs” in different states, cities, or communities that have particular enthusiasm and passion for Whole Communities work and who would embrace the opportunity to gather with kindred souls. Out of these gatherings

might emerge something as grand as a joint project or something as simple as a potluck dinner.

Direct training and technical assistance

Interviewees expressed interest in increasing individual and organizational capacity to build partnerships, engage communities, and operate across sectors. Interest was expressed in: dialogue, bridge building, and facilitation; cross-cultural communication and cultural competency, and storytelling as a means for exploration and relationship building. Although delivery mechanisms for this kind of capacity building were not discussed in detail, below are some brainstorm thoughts for different “broker” type roles CWC might consider playing to help meet training and coaching needs:

Train-the-trainer

CWC could sponsor occasional train-the-trainer workshops for professional trainers who specialize in, for example, facilitation, cross cultural communication, or conflict mediation. The CWC-sponsored training would expose trainers to CWC’s theory of change and Whole Thinking language. After going through a CWC workshop, these trainers could be included in a CWC database and matched with workshop and retreat alumni seeking expertise in these areas. Effort might be focused on identifying professionals from various regions in the country to attend the CWC training to ensure geographic distribution. I believe this model of training the trainer is along the lines of what the Institute for Conservation Leadership is currently using. We could possibly talk with Diane Russel (executive director at ICL) for more information. <http://www.icl.org/>

Train-the-consultant

A more specific area CWC in which might play a train-the-trainer role might be with the Whole Measures tool. In this scenario, CWC could gather a cadre of consultants experienced in participatory monitoring and evaluation to provide training in the Whole Measures tool. Once people were trained in Whole Measures, CWC could respond to requests for Whole Measures technical assistance by referring alumni to Whole Measures-trained consultants. If CWC was interested in exploring the idea of a Whole Measures training for consultants, the Leadership Learning Community is an organization focused on facilitating learning among leadership programs and they have a particular interest in monitoring and evaluation. Deborah Meehan is the executive director. <http://leadershiplearning.org/>

Train-the-coach

A number of interviewees (particularly retreat interviewees) expressed interest in receiving coaching to help them stay on track and stay inspired after the retreat. One way to respond to this need might be to provide training for a number of consultants (perhaps CWC faculty or people with those kinds of profiles) to coach in a way that is consistent with CWC’s approach. Once coaches were trained, CWC could offer “coaching subscriptions” between organizations or individuals and the trained coaches. I’m not aware of any other organization that plays this role with the coaching.

Administration

CWC could consider various administrative and pricing structures. For example, CWC could ask trainers, consultants, and coaches to pay their own expenses and possibly even require an attendance fee. This decision may be influenced by the importance and benefit to CWC of alumni having access to particular trainers, consultants, and coaches. Following the training, CWC might play an administrative role in connecting the organizations with trainers, and could perhaps ask for an administrative fee to cover the costs of this role (the fee could be made invisible to the organizational client by including it in the cost of the trainer/consultant/coach to the organization). Or perhaps they could simply provide a directory and let organizations and trainers find one another.

Consultant “rolodex”

If CWC did not want to invest the level of effort necessary to undertake the training of trainers, consultants, and coaches, they could consider simply having a database of these same trainers to use in making referrals for alumni. These trainers would not have the CWC “seal of approval” that the above workshops would provide, but CWC could still make referrals without providing endorsement. I believe this type of consultant/client matching is similar to the role that the Environmental Support Center plays for its grantees and constituents. <http://www.envsc.org/>