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Community Development Society (CDS) Fellows Program: A Purposeful Exploration to Strengthen Community

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Cover Page Footnote

A Report from the CDS Fellows Initiative. Contributing authors: Daniel Kahl, PhD. And Kristina Hains, PhD, University of Kentucky. The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Community Development Society Institutional Capacity Development Grant that supported the Community Development Fellows project.

Community Development Society (CDS) Fellows Program: A Purposeful Exploration to Strengthen Community

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Introduction

“Being a part of a community is related to a sense of belonging. Belonging happens when you see yourself fitting into a group or structure. We can control structure, that’s what community developers do.” (paraphrased from CDS Fellows member Mary Emery)

Professional development organizations have played an important role in the life of the academe. Networking, translating cultural norms, communicating professional development opportunities, building professional cohorts – these are all important roles that professional development organizations have played for individual faculty members. There are many professional development organizations today that struggle to maintain or increase membership and engage interaction. It is for this very reason that in 2017, the Community Development Society (CDS) created an Institutional Capacity Development grant. This grant was designed to provide funding for innovative projects with the potential to increase CDS member participation and expand membership. In response to this call, the CDS Fellows project was created.

Recipients of the first Institutional Capacity Development grant were two community leadership faculty from the Community Innovation Lab at the University of Kentucky. Drs. Daniel Kahl and Kristina Hains designed this program to create a structure to increase participation of Community Development Society members and expand CDS membership. More specifically, this initiative created a sustained learning group with the purpose of enhancing the capacity of CDS in four primary ways:

- 1) Encourage member engagement and commitment to CDS through increased activity of membership utilizing on-line association resources;
- 2) Increase and broaden diversity within CDS membership;
- 3) Enhance public awareness of CDS and its efforts;
- 4) Build institutional capacity for CDS through cross-disciplinary activity.

The CDS Fellows project brought participants together regularly over the course of a year to explore innovative community engagement applications and strategies in a variety of different community contexts. The project engaged a mix of new and longtime CDS members in groups representing five community development context areas – international, urban, professional/graduate students, quality of life, and community change. The Fellows met as a full group once a month virtually to discuss different aspects of innovative community engagement.

Concurrently, each group worked with a larger group of peers representing their prospective interests on some type of initiative that encouraged community engagement within that audience of interest. Organizing in this way spurred multiple groups of activity. At the end of the year-long program, participants presented on their group projects and identified the skills and knowledge gained throughout this synergistic program. Ultimately, this program provided a unique learning and professional development opportunity for both current and new CDS members.

This edition of *Community Development Practice* is dedicated to the CDS Institutional Development project. This article will detail outcomes of the core team experience. Adjoining articles will detail outcomes brought about through each of the CDS Fellows team initiatives.

CDS Background and Impetus for the Program

The Community Development Society is an association of members representing researchers, teachers, students, and practitioners from across North America and abroad with an interest in community development research and practice. The thread that ties membership together is a common interest in the practice of community development. In recent years the membership and involvement in the association had been declining. Overall active memberships in CDS had declined, and the CDS annual conference participation had dropped below historic averages. Other indicators of lagging participation included CDS blog posts limited in diversity of authors, infrequent social media posts, and underutilized resources for facilitating conversations through the CDS website. The overall indicators of membership and involvement in CDS showed potential for improvement. As such, an innovative way to engage members and encourage new members to join was needed.

Community developers are keenly aware that *how* people get engaged can influence the outcomes of community change initiatives. The CDS Fellows initiative was designed to become an avenue for active participation. The Fellows initiative provided a new structure for members to interact and engage within the association. In addition, the program was designed to attract and engage new members working in novel contexts. As society continues to shift, community development and the communities with which we work shifts as well – creating the necessity for engaging members within new contexts. Cultivating meaning and active involvement in the Fellows project was achieved by encouraging participants to test community engagement/strengthening activities with the groups they engaged. At monthly meetings, participants shared progress and results from the context of the respective communities. This sharing amongst program participants was seen as a particularly important aspect of the program, and ultimately provided an excellent platform for professional development of everyone involved.

The CDS Fellows Program

Pre-Program Preparation

The project began by soliciting applications from the CDS membership. As part of the application, the applicants needed to identify two to three potential collaborators from another association, team, or committee that could participate with them. By participating as a team, Fellows could learn together, reflect on the organization dynamics of the group they represent, and test ideas together within their identified community of interest.

Program Structure

Applications were accepted from five working teams, for a total of 18 participants. The Fellows met monthly for an online videoconference meeting. Each meeting began with updates on each group's progress and led into presentations of new information on important components and strategies of community engagement. Often groups were broken into different "virtual rooms" to apply skills or innovations discussed, and then the entire group came back together for an active discussion. Finally, each group was asked to reflect on and apply the concepts within their group's context. Additionally, members were encouraged to write about their discoveries, convene other groups, and contribute to blogs as part of their Fellows experience. A final requirement of the program was to develop a project that tested a new idea for innovative community engagement in their unique context.

Historically, much of the community development literature is focused on communities of place. From that perspective, the community population is conceptualized as everyone residing in an identified place. The approach adopted by the Fellows program pushed participants to reflect on the shared practices, goals, beliefs and interests that shape the relationships of people in varied types of communities. In doing so, the fellows explored additional commonalities of relationships and considered meaningful approaches to increase involvement in differing community types and contexts.

The monthly online videoconference meetings provided the Fellows an opportunity to reflect on and test new ideas with their constituent groups. Hosting a small group allowed the exploration of ideas and an engaged discussion. The monthly meetings were recorded and posted online for CDS members to view. An overview of the session conversation was summarized in a CDS blog written by one of the Fellows. A social media post on the CDS website was used to lead people to the blog article and encouraged broader commentary and discussion. This allowed other CDS members to engage in conversations about topics that transcended types of community work – and then open that conversation to others via online webinars and discussion groups. The overall process was likened to the metaphor of a "fishbowl." By leading the project in such a manner, the initiative aimed to increase CDS member involvement through conversational postings and expanded connections between members.

Program Impacts

Overall, the project resulted in several positive impacts, including new members to CDS and sparking conversations and action. Across the initiative as a whole, the project brought in 21 confirmed new members. Deliverables associated with the program included a manuscript published in the IACD magazine, and two webinars, one through the International CDS team and one in conjunction with the International Society of Quality of Life Studies. In addition, the team published seven CDS blogs/Vanguard articles and posted regular content to the CDS website discussion group the Community Innovation Lab website, Facebook, and LinkedIn. The increased documentation and sharing assisted in elevating the public presence of CDS by heightened contribution from CDS members throughout the year.

Below are two figures illustrating the increased engagement of CDS members throughout the project. While it is understood that not all of the increase can be attributed to the Fellows project, regular postings by Fellows certainly played a role.

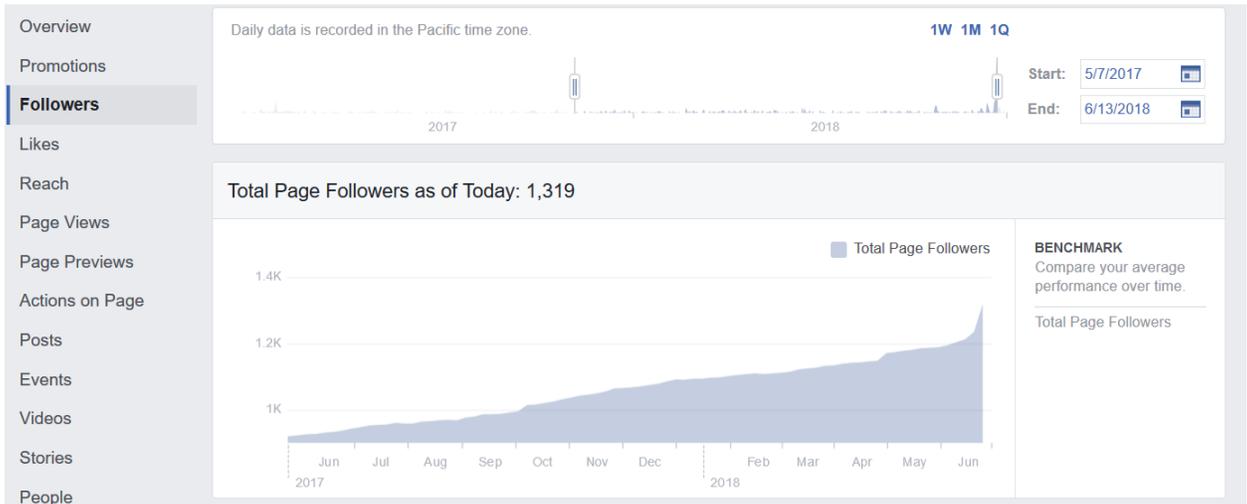


Figure 1. CDS Facebook page followership during 2017.

Throughout the Fellows project, blogs and Facebook posts were shared to increase member communication across the organization. Overall, the Facebook followership increased through 2017 (see Figure 1).

While the initiative was not as effective as hoped in engaging ongoing discussion groups on the CDS website, the overall use of the CDS website increased over the lifespan of the CDS Fellows program (see Figure 2). The CDS website also saw increases in new users, number of sessions, and page views over the time periods identified.

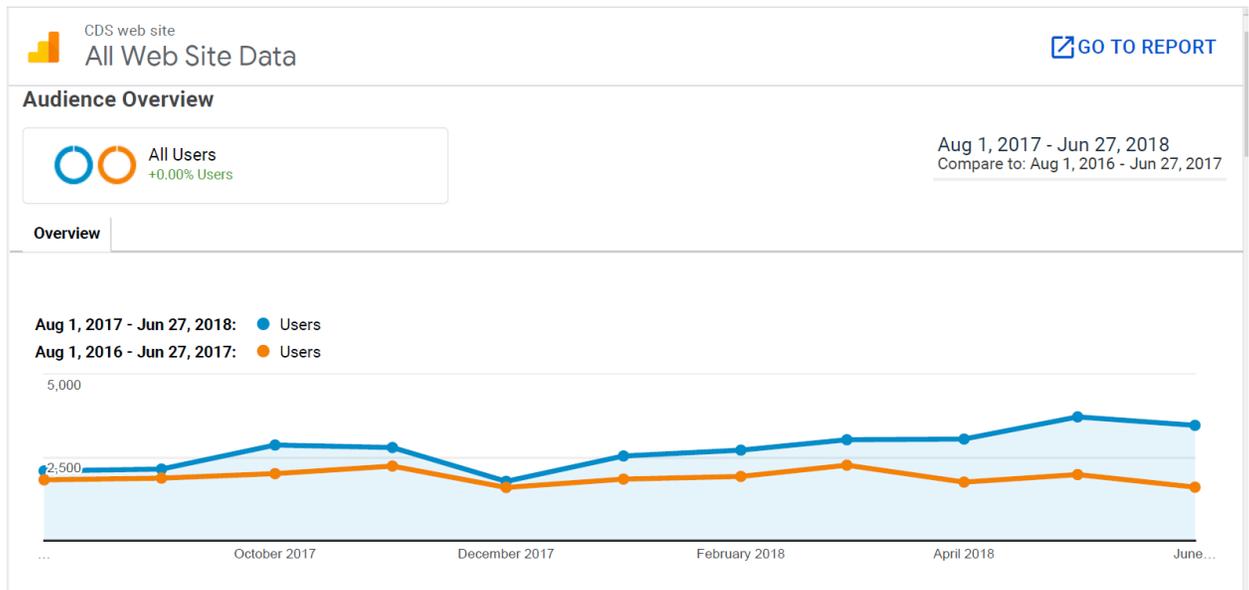


Figure 2. The use of the CDS website over two time periods.

Finally, the engagement of members in each of the group projects represent positive outcomes. The CDS Fellows project generated five projects. Each project engaged a group with the following goals:

- Improved connections with private community foundations,
- Enhance the international CDS member experience,
- Expand membership and engagement of graduate students and young professionals,
- Explore partnerships with other professional associations,
- Expand applied CD principles in urban settings.

Each of these projects is discussed in more detail in the accompanying articles.

Lessons Learned

Organizer Perspective

From the perspective of those coordinating this CDS Fellows program, several important lessons were learned throughout the life of the project, outlined in more detail below.

1) *Regular connection with peers can be both motivating and challenging.* Purposeful facilitation of networks requires forethought and preparation. One challenge of the project was that the Fellows met virtually from around the world. One member joined at 6 AM, while others carved time out of business hours or stayed after work to log in. Participation required investing time to connect. The purposeful investment of time was a requirement for the community to work effectively and resulted in a fundamental lesson learned. Regular engagement is pivotal to growing relationships and continuous learning. The development of closer relationships and growth in learning motivated increased participation. Project leaders must make sure participants are engaged and gaining value from each meeting. Creating the environment to allow exploratory thought and reflection sustained involvement and led to shared learning.

2) *Communicate, communicate, communicate.*

Sustaining international online volunteer initiatives is a challenge. The world is full of proximal issues that steal our attention. The nature of online interaction is often asynchronous communication. Initially we found that online discussion was challenging, and ideas were easily missed or left without a response. Designating an online discussion facilitator for posted communication was important. The facilitator was most effective when they could respond to written discussion threads quickly. Facilitating communication included responding to individual points and perspectives, and purposefully drawing others into the conversation.

3) *Videoconferencing software (and other online technology) makes meeting with dispersed groups easy.*

As technology continues to make society more and more globally connected, it also requires us to be willing to connect with others within different geographical regions. In the CDS Fellows program, most of the collaborative groups included members from around the United States and the world. Face-to-face meetings were therefore not practical, so our initiative used a video conferencing software called Zoom. Fortunately, Zoom was very user-friendly and allowed us (as facilitators) to very actively engage our participants. The software was easy to download, participants found it easy to use on their end, and troubleshooting was very straightforward. If you can't be face-to-face with your participants, video conferencing offers an excellent alternative.

4) *Bringing together a mixed group of community developers leads to diverse perspectives and creates synergy.*

A common belief within the world of community development asserts that if you bring diverse perspectives together, you will gain a clearer perspective of the whole. This proved to be true within this "co-learning" environment. Whether participants were on-the-ground practitioners, "pracademics" who work within the community, instructors in the classroom, or community researchers, all perspectives added value during the monthly meetings. By sharing expertise and individual professional experiences from around the world, the monthly meetings generated active discussions and a stronger multi-disciplinary cohort. Explaining interventions to other community development professionals helped refine ideas, to test assumptions, and bounce ideas off others. Each individual learned from the other, leading to a feeling of synergy among the group that also boosted commitment and motivation due to peer support.

5) *Dispensing funding to dispersed groups can be challenging.*

One particularly motivating factor to support participation were the \$2500 mini grants each group received to support their programming/research. However, due to conflicting accountability policies between different organizations, distributing the funds to the groups (usually with participants dispersed across the US) proved challenging between multiple bureaucratic systems. Make certain to check into the bureaucracy surrounding financial distribution policies and have a plan ready for use.

Overall, it was mentioned repeatedly by participants that having opportunity to share with peers was valuable. This is not available within many smaller community development-oriented institutions; furthermore, due to the

demanding professional load that most community development professionals carry, there is little time to seek out other types of peer support discussions. Thus, having a scheduled meeting once a month where they can share and learn with other peers was extremely rewarding. Ultimately this speaks to the importance of professional associations and connections with mentors or peer engagement within the life of a professional – especially across institution lines.

Participant Perspective

At the culmination of the program, the Fellows participated in a Ripple Mapping (Emery, Higgins, Chazdon, & Hansen, 2015) evaluation process to brainstorm and assess primary and secondary impacts resulting from the Fellows meetings. While each team is documenting their team impacts in this *Community Development Practice*, below is a summary of the process impacts resulting from this project identified by the members.

- 1) ***Convening through the Fellows facilitated better connections between organizations.*** Fellows identified that the networking process provided opportunities to bring practitioners together and has led to new partnerships. By purposefully working to expand shared learning, the fellows process has provided a different type of connection. Participants commented that the project has helped rejuvenate their efforts and find an interest in pushing forward with new agendas.
- 2) ***Working in different contexts has reinforced the need for common language, definitions, and shared understanding.*** Fellows noted that the shared conversations helped to break the CD “code” – or language that we use within our peer networks. Openly discussing what we meant with these terms allowed us to better connect with outside groups in their language.
- 3) ***The structure of the project lent structure to CDS involvement.*** Fellows noted that the project helped them focus their attention on their community engaged work. Application of new ideas and sharing thoughts between colleagues facilitated finding and maintaining the focus on key or most important goals of their efforts. The project also offered consistent reflection on how individual efforts could connect with or support the broader CDS community.
- 4) ***The structure of the project allowed us to overcome distance.*** The structure of the CDS Fellows project had multiple benefits. Regular meetings helped participants to stay connected and focused. Limited timeframes pushed community project activity forward, and the funding helped to provide incentive for staying engaged. The overall Fellows project helped to identify opportunities, create new knowledge, and create new bridging social capital.

Summary of Lessons Learned

While this was not a scientific undertaking, the community-building experience provided the Fellows and affiliated network of community groups several important lessons. Whatever context we may be working in, cultivation of community is more successful when we attend to the following aspects of our work. 1) Purposeful engagement. The fellows project shows us that regular, structured opportunities for participation is most effective when it helps people know when and how to engage. 2) Be responsive. Inclusion is relationship based.

Relationships require an investment of attention and interest. Invite people in, listen to them, and help them see how they can be a part of the community. 3) Involvement is not a one-time offer. Each of us lives in a complex network of relationships and responsibilities. Involvement in professional associations may or may not be the momentary priority for members. Hold the door open for opportunities to become engaged. 4) Be open to learning. The assumptions any team member holds may be narrowly focused. Being part of a professional learning community requires mutual respect and an openness to learning. In sum, the relationships that give community structure need investment in order to become and remain strong.

Challenges

As with any project, challenges arose during the CDS Fellows program. Busy individual professional schedules interrupted participation and affected group progress. Participation levels fluctuated, and missing a meeting could throw a member out of sync with progress. Recording and posting meetings helped to address this in the same way that meeting minutes can keep absent members informed. Sustained participation throughout the year-long program was a challenge. Generally, if the group project was in alignment with Fellows' professional goals, there was a higher likelihood to persevere and bring the group project to fruition. Finally, translating across the fields/professions was challenging; often, diverse fields have different terminology and when several fields come together, the facilitator frequently must also play the role of "translator." All of these issues were dealt with throughout the life of the program and assisted in strengthening the overall project in the end.

Future Directions

Looking to the future, professional development organizations will continue to play an important role in the field of community development. However, how these professional organizations are structured, and how they engage their membership will directly impact the member experience. One way to encourage engagement with current and new members learned through this initiative is to develop synergistic learning groups that focus on issues important within the field. Facilitation of smaller, focused groups can encourage stronger professional relationships. Through videos, blog posts, and interactive online networks, the focused small group discussions can be shared as fodder for broader inclusion and conversation. With purposeful facilitation, an online platform and collaboration, professional organizations can be a great opportunity for co-learning and development to happen among peers.

References

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