

The Evaluation Frameworks of the Neighbourhood Leadership Institute 2014 – 2016 and Next Steps

Introduction

Based on a number of existing models of community leadership including, Neighbourhood Leadership Institutes (NLIs) in the United States, Asset-Based Community Development, and the Social Change Leadership Development Model, Hamilton's Neighbourhood Leadership Institute (NLI) was developed following an early pilot in 2013 (which operated under a different model; the 2013 pilot is not included in the following evaluation framework descriptions). The re-envisioned resident-focused program developed by the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF) in partnership with Mohawk College, and the City of Hamilton in 2014 was the first program of its kind in Canada.

Over a period of ten weeks in the spring of each year, the program brings together Hamilton residents from across the City's neighbourhoods working in pairs to explore projects that benefit their communities. The participants' projects are a vehicle for their leadership learning and development. Each week, participants meet in a different neighbourhood to give participants the opportunity to showcase their community, and strengthen the connections between participants from different neighbourhoods. The NLI focuses on leadership skill development through an evidence-informed educational model that is experiential and inquiry-based. By completing the program, participants are entitled to one post-secondary college general education course credit and a small grant from Hamilton Community Foundation to assist in launching their project. The program is designed to foster social change through enhancing residents' leadership skills in a way that is socially responsible, collaborative, inclusive, as well as values- and process-based.

Program Evaluation in 2014

At the end of the NLI's 2013 pilot, no program evaluation was conducted. Following the re-design of the NLI's resident stream in 2014, a program evaluation was conducted by partners at McMaster University.

Prior to the launch of the spring sessions in 2014, a program evaluation strategy was designed and feedback was received from Mohawk College, the Hamilton Community Foundation, and other stakeholders.

- 1) **A pre-test survey** was developed that collected demographic information on each participant; and a pre-test inventory of participant self-reported strengths and areas for improvement
- 2) **A post-test survey** was developed that included a post-test inventory of self-reported skill development; details on course satisfaction; and overall satisfaction

Both surveys were created using SurveyMonkey and paper copies were given to all participants. The post-test survey was also circulated electronically for participants who were unable to attend the final session where the survey was handed out. For the purposes of program evaluation, participants created a unique, non-identifiable participant ID so that change over time could be tracked.

- 3) **Participant observations** were carried out by one of the evaluators during six of the sessions. This allowed the researchers to adjust and make observations about group dynamics and to document how the course was progressing. In addition, the researchers met with the course coordinators at least monthly throughout the course time and participated in faculty course planning meetings.
- 4) **A small-group activity** was developed that asked participants to create a plan for making the NLI sustainable in the future. This activity stimulated group discussion on the course as a whole, and provided participants with a chance to reflect on the content of the course by applying learned skills to a “problem.” Specifically, participants were asked to think about: a) how to go about making the NLI program a program that can continue for years and b) how would you launch it again next year, what are the steps you think you would need to take? It was deliberately vague to have the group demonstrate group work skills in leadership and group dynamics. The small-group activity was video recorded for future media presentation use.
- 5) **A focus group** with all participants followed the small-group activity. All participants engaged in a group discussion on the activity they had just completed and were asked to provide feedback on their experiences of the course as a whole. The focus group was video recorded so contributions from each participant could be recorded, transcribed, and reported upon.
- 6) **Key informant interviews** were conducted with those involved in the development of the program. Key informants from the three main institutions were conducted (e.g., Hamilton Community Foundation; Mohawk College; and, City of Hamilton). The purpose of these interviews were to determine the goals of each institutions’ participation and how well these goals were met for each organization. In addition, each organization had an opportunity comment on the initial draft of the report and this commentary shaped the discussion and conclusion of the report.

The recordings were sent for transcription, analyzed using qualitative methodologies and organized into themes. The survey data was entered and analyzed using SPSS.

Results of the evaluation were used to guide the NLI’s decision making for subsequent years, as well as provide evidence to donors, sponsors and future potential partnerships of the value and impact of leadership development training in Hamilton.

Program Evaluations in 2015 and 2016

After the 2014 sessions, program evaluations were conducted on the last week of sessions with an external independent researcher. For the 2015 sessions, the independent researcher was approached to observe the last two sessions and then had multiple discussions with the NLI staff that resulted in developing:

- 1) **A survey** that captured demographic data, course effectiveness, and allowed participants to share feedback anonymously. This survey was designed to capture information to mirror the 2014 data and allow for comparisons.
- 2) **A focus group** discussion that allowed participants to share their thoughts about the program, reflect on their personal development, and provide ideas for the improvement of the sessions (topic based, logistical or otherwise).

The independent researcher coded the results of the survey and discussion to maintain the anonymity of the participants and NLI Staff only use the aggregated results to enhance the next iteration of the program.

The same survey and focus group discussion format was used in 2016 with minor modifications to the survey to allow for better sensitivity in collecting course effectiveness and satisfaction data and include more qualitative data capturing methods. This gave the participants more opportunities to reflect on their experiences within the NLI.

Results

Over the past three years, there has been noticeable improvement to the NLI's resident stream program. Foremost, participants' perceived effectiveness has increased every year. In 2014, the average effectiveness rating was 8.20 (10 being the highest rating), then 8.29 in 2015, and finally 8.88 in 2016. This demonstrates that, on average, participants' belief that the course achieves its goals is steadily increasing from year to year with more of a consensus between participants.

There was an increase in the number of participants who would recommend the course to others, with 86% saying they would in 2015, and 100% in 2016. In addition, there has been an increase in the NLI matching participants' expectations. In 2015, only 50% of participants' expectations were matched, but then this number increased to 95% in 2016. These increases are likely due to the implementation of the interview process and program launch session in 2016 in response to the feedback from the 2015 evaluation. This allowed participants to have a better idea of what NLI is before making a commitment, aligning their personal learning and leadership goals with the educational offering of the program.

The NLI did respond to participants' comments on the scheduling of the course, which has led to increased satisfaction. In 2015, 50% of participants were completely satisfied with the

irregular schedule. With the 3 weeks of learning sessions followed by 1 week off schedule, 70% of participants were completely satisfied. The NLI also improved upon many of the topics that participants wanted more of a focus on. This included conflict resolution skills, grant writing, and research.

Finally, the NLI addressed some of participants' suggestions for improvements. The number of facilitators was reduced to increase bonding with participants, certain activities were removed after participants shared their feedback, and additional support was offered to those who needed it.

Overall, the NLI continuously strives to respond appropriately to participants' comments and suggestions and build on the feedback in planning the next sessions.

Next Steps

As it approaches its fourth session since its redesign in 2014, the NLI's resident stream continues to be committed to further developing its educational offerings for emerging community leaders in Hamilton. The NLI is also committed to serving the community and fitting the needs of its growing number of participants and alumni. Thus, in 2017, the NLI will be expanding the current program evaluation to track the skill development of participants after the program and correlate these results to the overall learning outcomes of the NLI. This expanded evaluation will build off of the previous evaluation frameworks and will include (in addition to the pre- and post-program interviews and focus group discussion):

- 1) **Pre-NLI survey** to measure self-reported mastery levels of relevant skills
- 2) **Post-NLI survey** to measure development in skill levels after the program is administered

The NLI will also administer an evaluation in 2017 specifically focused on alumni. This evaluation will track alumni development formally in the form of a survey and a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. This would allow alumni from the 2014, 2015 and 2016 cohorts to reflect on their experiences within the NLI, how they have used what they have learned in the program, and where they are now (e.g. going back to school, finding work, being more involved in the community, etc).

It is important to note that the 2017 evaluation framework for alumni will follow a non-experimental design, which will not explore a causal relationship between observed outcomes (i.e. participation in the NLI and outcomes in terms of education, employment and civic participation). A non-experimental (implicit) design is best suited to the NLI, and is a widely used design framework informing program evaluations in health, community and social settings worldwide. A non-experimental design is best suited to settings that:

- There is no obvious control group available

- It is not reasonable to assign interventions on a random basis

Non-experimental design is characterized by:

- “Naturalistic inquiry” in the ‘real-world’ rather than in manipulated settings
- Consideration for the social context in which the program operates
- Development (inductive analysis) rather than testing of hypotheses (deductive analysis)
- The use of non-standardised, semi-structured or unstructured methods which are sensitive to the social context of the study

The non-experimental design will inform the NLI’s impact evaluation with alumni for both exploratory and descriptive purposes. It will include:

- Examining community leadership outcomes (both intended and unintended). This is a topic that is currently poorly understood in the literature.
- Helping to identify factors that contribute to successful or unsuccessful program delivery
- Exploring the various civic, social and inter/intra-personal contexts in which alumni are supported to meet their goals and how these networks interface with the program’s outcomes
- Exploring the inter/intra-relationships across and between different groups, communities and individuals supporting alumni to meet their goals

The results of the 2017 evaluations will be available by January 2018.

Source: Hamilton Community Foundation, Neighbourhood Leadership Institute, 2017.