

Capacity-Building Assessment of Environmental and Conservation Organizations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Completed by the Institute for Conservation Leadership and
the Environmental Support Center
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Introduction

Between August and November 2004, the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) and the Environmental Support Center (ESC) conducted a three-stage assessment of environmental and conservation organizations in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey through funding from the William Penn Foundation. The goal of the assessment was to learn about the organizational capacity building needs of organizations in the region in order for ICL and ESC to offer programming and assistance tailored to the needs of organizations in the region. The information gathered and resulting recommendations may also aid the William Penn Foundation in their ability to effectively support organizations whose work advances the protection and restoration of watersheds and promotes sustainable regional development.

The purpose of this report is to provide a general overview of what ICL and ESC learned and their findings as presented to the William Penn Foundation. This public report is divided into the following sections:

- Methodology and Participation
- Findings

Methodology and Participation

The three stages of the assessment included an online survey in August, phone interviews in October, and a focus group discussion in November. Over the course of the assessment, 43 organizations in the region participated in one or more stage.

Online Survey

Through collaboration between ICL, ESC, and the William Penn Foundation, survey questions were drafted to gather quantitative data on the organizations':

- staffing
- budget size
- strategic planning practice
- board involvement
- membership
- volunteers
- policy work
- collaboration

- priority areas for organizational and leadership development
- prior use of and resources for organizational and leadership development services and
- under-resourced areas of organizational and leadership development.

The questions were compiled into an online survey which was sent electronically to 94 organizations in the region. These contacts were gathered from the existing databases of ICL and ESC as well as the list grantees of the William Penn Foundation.

Thirty-five complete surveys were submitted online (a 37% response rate). The participating organizations ranged from all-volunteer to large staffed groups as illustrated through the following chart.

Staff Size Ranges	Number of Orgs	% of Respondents
All-volunteer, no paid staff	2	6%
1-4 staff members	13	37%
5-10 staff members	12	34%
More than 10 staff members	8	23%

As the chart below indicates, the respondents' organizations were wide-ranging in terms of their budget size as well.

Annual Budget Ranges	Numbers of Organizations	Percentage of Respondents
\$0 to \$299,999	16	46%
\$300,000 to \$749, 999	7	30%
\$750,000 and higher	12	34%

The responding organizations were representative of the breadth of the environmental movement in their areas of focus including land preservation, watershed and waterway protection, smart growth, local environmental clean-up, clean air and clean water, community education, and multi-issue.

Phone Interview

The compiled results of the online survey were reviewed and areas of further interest were identified in order to draft questions for the assessment's second stage of phone interviews. During October 2004, ICL conducted phone interviews with 22 leaders of environmental and conservation organizations in the region. Of the 22, 19 of the organizations had participated in the online survey. The additional organizations were selected from the previously mentioned lists. The purpose of the phone interviews was to gather more qualitative data to complement the quantitative data gathered through the online survey.

The interview consisted of fourteen questions focusing on seven areas of organizational capacity building:

- strategic planning
- board development
- membership
- policy and advocacy work
- collaboration with other organizations
- income diversification and fundraising
- preferred training formats

The interviewees were not asked about their organization's budget and staff size but because the majority had participated in the online survey, we reason that the mix of organizations represented was comparable to that of the online respondents. The work of organizations participating in the phone interviews also represented a wide range of environmental issues.

Focus Group

The final stage of the assessment process was a two hour focus group discussion in mid-November. Leaders of ten environmental organizations from the region participated. A random group of organizations that had participated in the online survey and/or phone interview were invited as well as some additional William Penn Foundation grantees and organizations tapped by ESC. Of the ten participants, five of the organizations had participated in the online survey and/or phone interview. Again we would reason that the organizational demographics were comparable to those of online survey respondents.

John Russonello of Beldon Russonello and Stewart moderated the focus group. Participants discussed their organizational goals and aspirations, their perceived strengths and challenges, building capacity, the role of boards, and collaboration.

Assessment Findings

The goal of the organizational assessment of Pennsylvania and New Jersey environmental and conservation of groups was to provide the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) and the Environmental Support Center (ESC) with a better understanding of the groups in the region so we may offer programming and assistance that will help them meet their capacity building needs. The information and recommendations in this report will also help the William Penn Foundation strengthen its ability to support environmental groups in the region.

In conducting the assessment, we focused on trying to better understand:

- Leadership development
- Organizational development
- Coalition/network development and
- Capacity building assistance in general

The seven findings articulated by ICL and ESC represent general themes from the three-stage assessment process. We have attempted to emphasize themes from all three stages and have highlighted when what we heard was more prominent in one part of the assessment over another. These findings inform our recommendations later in the following section.

1. Many groups think of “capacity building” in terms of additional resources and general support rather than some type of consulting or training services.

In the focus group, leaders indicated that they know what their capacity building needs are and if they had general support they could address those needs. Most of those needs are related to

technology and fundraising. While leaders said that technology has greatly simplified many tasks, they also said that upgrading technology is essential. Choosing the best technology for their organization's needs and using it properly is critical to their success. Leaders said they probably wouldn't hire a full-time technology person, but would like to have a consultant on call to assist them when needed. Capacity building is less about access to training programs or consultants, but more about having the resources and ability to do their own internal capacity building and ongoing assessment.

At the same time, nearly 75% of the respondents to the online questionnaire had participated in some type of capacity building training or workshop during the previous year. For specific capacity building needs, fundraising and resource development were cited as the top need, followed by organizational vision and strategic planning, and board development. Although participants in the interviews and focus group would like to see more active boards, leaders participating in the focus groups said they have low expectations of their boards. Vision and planning was not cited in the focus group discussion, which may be a result of the type of groups participating or the questions asked. In some instances, especially the focus group, building capacity was closely aligned with things like community support and message.

Our board is involved and engaged in a meaningful way. The challenge is having a diversity of skills sets—legal, accounting, etc.—while also having a diversity of backgrounds that are representative of the region.

In terms of how they receive capacity building assistance, most leaders responded that it depended on the situation. For some, assistance that focused on a specific need would be most helpful if it were provided at the direct organizational level. Others thought there was benefit to meeting with others working in the field. By a wide margin, leaders view training workshops or programs and peer-to-peer exchange as the most effective way to meet their organizational and leadership needs.

2. Increasing and diversifying fundraising is a top priority.

Leaders stated that fundraising has become more time consuming because of the need to write grants for restricted funds. Costs have risen while the availability of general or operational grants has decreased. According to the online questionnaire, fundraising was the number one form of assistance groups received last year either by attending a training workshop or some type of consulting assistance. At the same time, it remains the highest need. In order to increase and diversify their fundraising, leaders want to be able to hire more staff and receive help from board members in relationship building (not necessarily direct fundraising by board members).

During the phone interviews, some leaders spoke about their belief that there will always be a desire to increase and diversify fundraising because the needs are so great and that many organizations lack a fundraising “culture.” They continue to attend training workshops, but lack the resources to fully implement what they learn or lack the desire or ability to initiate the culture shift that is necessary to truly make the types of deep changes that are needed.

When I started most of the grants were general support grants....now they are very specific grants for very specific work and it is much harder to sort of raise the fullness of funding than it was when I started years and years ago.

The fundamental challenge is that most of the people come to an organization for the mission and know fundraising is necessary but it's not what they really want to do. Fundraising has to be a central organizing feature of the organization—a part of the culture.

3. Most groups report that they are engaged in some type of policy work, more often at the local level rather than state level. Leaders want to improve advocacy efforts through better communications with the public and “activating” their membership.

In the online questionnaire, education of decision-makers and community organizing were most often cited by leaders as the ways they engaged in advocacy. Although greater membership involvement was a need articulated by leaders in the focus group to increase effectiveness, membership and volunteer development was the fourth most important priority to strengthen the organization and its effectiveness for leaders who completed the online questionnaire.

Leaders in the focus group spoke about using communication to engage members, to reach new audiences, and to get their members more involved (or “out the door” as one leader put it).

[If my budget were 10% higher] I would use it for an internal media messaging person to enhance outreach to our members existing and potential, activate them on issues, get them more involved with the organization, and feel more connected.

4. Leaders report a significant amount of collaboration among groups, but they also face many challenges to effective and long-term collaboration.

In the online questionnaire, leaders reported that most collaboration happened around the issues of open space and smart growth. In the focus group, most collaboration examples were around clean air and water. The most common forms of collaboration are exchanging information regularly and collaborating on ongoing programs. Many organizations also work on public policy together (83% in the online questionnaire). Barriers to collaboration include:

- Finding common ground in priorities and approach to advocacy
- Allocating staff time (lack of staff)
- Pressure from funders that has resulted in inappropriate collaboration and
- Cost and time it takes for state-wide collaboration.

Leaders in the focus group talked about the need to understand that winning and losing won't be equal for groups that participate in a collaborative effort, and the difficulties in maintaining collaboration over a long period of time. They said it is rare that everyone gets what they want when collaborating. They stated that assistance was not needed initiating collaboration, but it was needed when there is a problem, or when solutions/goals are more complex.

Difference of philosophy, opinion, or approach [are barriers]—finding that there isn't a common goal among potential partners. This can leave people with a feeling of unrest...unresolved. People come together with good intentions—then find that goals aren't compatible; those experiences cause people to be hesitant to enter into future collaborative work.

I don't view time and money as barriers [to collaboration]. If that is true then collaboration is not the right approach. The biggest barrier is that the benefits of collaboration are over-rated. We need to recognize that there are limits...Having said that, problems could be miscues and communication. There's always going to be a creative tension. It's systemic and one that we need to have. It doesn't mean that we should give up collaboration, but think about when collaboration is appropriate.

5. Leaders would like more active boards; some report having low expectations of their boards.

Many leaders would like board members who are more active in fundraising. Some leaders expressed this desire as an ability to “open doors.” In the focus group, however, there was some disagreement over the role of board members in fundraising. In general, leaders said that their boards' strengths are related to their dedication to the mission and a diversity of skills.

Our organization has a working board with active committees. The board of directors is involved and engaged in a meaningful way. Our challenge is having a diversity of skill sets, such as legal and accounting, etc.—while also having a diversity of backgrounds representative of the region.

I have a number of board members who were on specifically to represent a constituency, a viewpoint, or what have you, and they bring talent and perspective, but they don't necessarily bring dollars. It is important that people from those perspectives and from those backgrounds be able to serve on a nonprofit board and not get thrown out because they can't raise money.

6. Based on the online questionnaire, approximately 20% of organizations don't have a strategic plan. For those that have them, the process for creating it and how they assess progress varies in terms of who is involved in that process.

A majority of groups have a strategic plan and assess that plan in some way on a regular basis (usually annually). About one-third of the groups have a plan that is three or more years old. In the online questionnaire, strategic planning and visioning was cited as one of the top three needs. The major difference between groups is to what extent they involve people from outside the organization.