



AUGUST 3, 2021

Nexus Community Engagement Institute: New Structure, New Pathways

At Nexus, we believe that community engagement is central to ushering out the rigged rules, attitudes, and practices that concentrate wealth and power in fewer and whiter hands, and ushering in ways of living, working, and making decisions together that nourish communities for this generation and generations to come.

The Nexus Community Engagement Institute (NCEI) is committed to establishing beloved communities by co-creating transformation and healing through community engagement. NCEI cultivates our community engagement practices with community through three main bodies of work, which we call **growing, gathering and harvesting**.

As for many others, 2020 brought for us transition, heartache, anger, deeper community love, care, and transformation into new ways of thinking and living into our mission. Within NCEI, this included an explicit, reinvigorated determination to restore power to the people and communities who continue to be harmed by the legacy of cultural genocide, colonization, enslavement, white supremacy, toxic patriarchy, and other systems of oppression. Communities, particularly those directly harmed by oppressive systems, have the right to self-determination and to enjoy full participation in any society.



New Pathways:

Where we've come and where we're headed

NCEI honors what has come before, and what is yet to come through broad engagement and co-creation with people doing community engagement on-the-ground. Since 2016, NCEI has been advancing and strengthening communities through equity-based community engagement both locally and nationally. We've grown and developed from the work of the [Building the Field of Community Engagement](#) collaborative, a four-year initiative designed to magnify and elevate the power of community engagement to change the way problems are solved and resources are invested.

Now, we are re-imagining our bodies of work using the language grow, gather and harvest to more closely align with Nexus values of nourishing and cultivating our relationships with community and one another, as well as healing current and ancestral trauma. We believe using land-based language helps us be in better relationship with community engagement work, knowing that the seeds for systems change we plant now can transform and nourish future generations.

GROW - in this body of work, we welcome people to the practice of community engagement as a means of achieving racial equity and abolishing oppressive systems. In addition, we expand the tools and networks for folks already doing this work. We call this “grow” because this is where we grow the field through training and workshops in what community engagement is, and how to do it.

GROWING INCLUDES:

- **Tapping the Potential of Community Engagement:** a 4-part Introduction to the Field of Community Engagement. This cohort-based workshop series introduces participants to foundational community engagement practices and principles.
- **Coaching and Consulting:** working with institutions, systems and communities to strengthen their ability to implement authentic community engagement policies and practices.
- **Safety & Justice Challenge:** providing community engagement coaching and support to grantees within the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s Safety & Justice Challenge. We work with people in the criminal legal system to rethink public safety and reduce jail populations in the U.S.



GATHER - in this body of work, we convene folks together in communities of practice. In these gatherings and cohorts, we deepen our practice in using community engagement to eliminate systems of oppression and transform organizations and communities. We call this “gather” because we bring folks together to learn from each other, support one another, and heal from the harm of working within historically oppressive systems.

GATHERING INCLUDES:

- **Engaged Learning Series:** convenings for community members to learn more about issues and opportunities emerging in the field of community engagement through deep dives and open conversations.
- **Neighborhood Leadership Program:** an annual cohort-based program to support diverse community members to explore awareness of self, work effectively through cultural differences, and take meaningful action in their communities and neighborhoods (see below for more on NLP).



HARVEST - in this body of work, we build on the collected wisdom of the folks we've grown and gathered with. From this knowledge, we co-create tools and resources to nourish the field of community engagement. We call this "harvest" because we're harvesting the wisdom that we've cultivated together.

HARVESTING INCLUDES:

- **Tools** such as our Community Engagement Assessment Tool and Impacts of Community Engagement Model.
- **Stories of Impact** of community engagement to support people, communities and systems to explore, embed and expand community engagement principles and practices in their work.




We are also embarking on a 2021 journey mapping process to grow from the lessons we learned in our 2016 strategic plan and guide us into the next five years of the Institute. We're hosting one-on-ones across the community in order to deepen relationships, gauge the pulse of the community, and explore how NCEI can best support the ecosystem of community engagement.

Welcoming the Neighborhood Leadership Program to the Nexus Community Engagement Institute

As we grow, gather, and harvest with communities, we know we must center and remain tethered to people who are powerfully building with their communities. The Neighborhood Leadership Program (NLP), formerly a program of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, does exactly that—it supports community leaders on their healing and transformation journeys, while grounding them in the engagement practices necessary to build permanently organized communities.

NLP has been a staple resource in the Twin Cities region for over 20 years, and it has a robust and engaged alumni network with over 600 community members. Each year, NLP brings 25 people together across neighborhoods and identities—like race, class, gender, age, and others—to deepen self awareness, learn skills to work effectively across difference, and create change in their communities. As NLP becomes a core piece of NCEI's work, we commit to honoring the past, being mindful in the emergent present, and building toward an irresistible future.

Since early 2021, NCEI staff have been connecting with alumni and partners of NLP to explore how to best honor its legacy and envision its future. The first NLP cohort at Nexus is slated to launch this Fall. Contact [mk.nguyen](mailto:mk.nguyen@nexuscp.org) for more information or to connect about NLP: NLP@nexuscp.org.

An illustration at the top of the page shows several diverse people working together in a garden. On the left, a person in a yellow shirt and blue pants is digging. In the center, a person with dark skin and a red shirt is looking on. To their right, a person with orange hair and glasses is visible. Further right, a person with a red headscarf and a green and white striped shirt is watering plants with a blue watering can. The background is a light pinkish-orange with some green foliage and a small flag on the left.

NCEI Team Update: New Co-Leadership Structure for NCEI staff

For us, the transformation and healing had to begin internally. To better reflect our belief in the power of collective leadership to shift oppressive narratives and change systems for the better, NCEI has transitioned into a co-leadership model. This change is an intentional way for us to:

- **Collaborate.** More closely reflect the collective way we do our work, allowing for deeper relationship-building across staff and community. By working together more closely day-to-day, we can prevent the isolation that organizational leaders can all too often experience, especially BIPOC leaders.
- **Practice wellness.** Distribute a more equitable workload that allows for better work-life balance, time to invest in our own personal healing, and alleviate burnout for directors and staff.
- **Share decision-making.** Co-leaders are able to make better decisions by bringing together their experiential knowledge, intersecting identities, and diverse and complementary skill sets.
- **Be more sustainable.** Create greater stability and continuity moving forward as we shift, grow and adapt. As individuals transition through their leadership roles at NCEI, our collaborative leadership model will help sustain knowledge, relationships, and practice throughout the Institute.

We are excited about this new structure, knowing it won't always be easy. It will require more intentionality, deeper self-awareness and togetherness, which requires more time. It will take longer and be messier – and we're here for that beautiful, messy, ambiguous and emergent process – because that's how healing and transformation happens.

