

Wellesley Institute Labs

Lab Report No. 3: What would a Connected Communities project look like in Toronto?

Introduction

Systems level change is overwhelming. How do you get people to see the big picture? This Wellesley Institute Lab approached the challenge of developing a new project in Toronto by engaging stakeholders to contribute their ideas and expertise into what this project could and should look like. Wellesley Institute is interested in exploring the idea of a “Connected Communities” project in Toronto, and wanted to start the initial conversation through an ideas lab. Wellesley Institute Labs provide the opportunity to generate collaborative discussion and use facilitated methods to draw on the wisdom of the group. We invited stakeholders and partners to join us in the exploration of a new project idea for the GTA that looks at “cradle to career” opportunities for success and how to make sure that the steps along the way aren’t broken.

We had three made objectives going into the lab:

- 1) Partnerships: Steering the social inclusion dialogue to a piece of work that makes sense
- 2) Project: Shaping Camille’s connected communities project
- 3) Existing Work with City: To develop and deliver Camille’s project we need to get other stakeholders on board

Planning & Exercises

We started off planning with an experiential and a rational aim that looked like this:

Goal/Rational Aim: Using the wisdom of the group, create an informed research strategy for developing a pilot on connected communities in the GTA.

Experiential Aim: Our stakeholders connect and collaborate with us on project development, share expertise and perspective

We designed four exercises:

1. Mapping the System: Using a large wall space, we designed an exercise that got people to map four elements onto a “staircase” that took people through the life course from birth to employment. We used the analogy of a staircase to talk about the different steps throughout the life course that will take people from cradle to career. Some pre-work had been done on the staircase already. The group was asked to fill in the gaps. Broadly we: brainstorm foundational programs; identified the linking programs; Identified the breakdown events; and, identified looping back programs (for when people get way off the staircase).

2. Guiding Principles: This next exercise was designed to identify values and guiding principles. We wanted to know what the underlying values are of these programs throughout the life course. (This information was supposed to feed into the next two steps). We wanted consensus on these values from the experts in the room, to ensure that these are the right values with which to be guiding the work. We didn't end up doing this exercise with the group and that will be explained in the execution and observations section.

3. Features and Foundations: David Morris presented on his work. With that presentation we wanted to ask, what are the features that must be included in a connected communities project in Toronto. Thinking back to our guiding principles and the map, what are the necessary features that this project must include? If we look at our list and don't see all of the values reflected, then do we need to add more features?

4. Where and Why: This next group consensus exercise wanted to identify what the study neighbourhood features should be. We wanted location criteria for choosing a site. How do we apply all of what we have just discussed to a connected communities project in the GTA?

Execution & Observations

The lab worked for the most part. What we ran into was a timing issue for activities. Although we had rehearsed the lab, we didn't anticipate the length of time people would take to work through each stage of the first exercise, and realized quickly that it needed a dedicated half day. We were working with an afternoon session, rather than a full day, and in retrospect, the lab should have been a full day.

Once we were off time with the first exercise, we modified the lab by skipping the guiding principles exercise. This bought us time, but we missed this valuable piece of the conversation and it was noted by participants that they wanted to include this piece. Further, the lab was designed with a lot of forethought into how the exercises would feed into each other, and so without the guiding principles the final two exercises didn't work. The flow of the lab was lost and less structured conversation dominated the second half of the lab with fewer outcomes.

If shortening the lab on the fly is necessary in order to keep the flow of the exercise, then the order should be preserved. Also, a contingency plan at various stages should be thought through in advance.

These observations about the execution will serve to inform future Wellesley Lab processes.

Feedback and Evaluation

Pending Survey Results

Outputs

The lab resulted in a report on the content of the lab and a project plan for the idea moving forward.

A follow up lab is planned for a different set of stakeholders. This lab will be co-developed with stakeholders and involve training facilitators from the stakeholder group to co-run the lab.