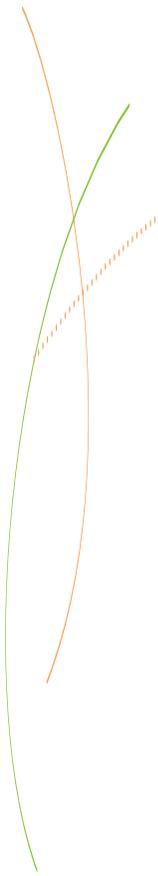


WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE

AN EVALUATION OF  
WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE'S  
PROGRAMS IN THE  
UNITED STATES IN 2004

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# AN EVALUATION OF WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE'S PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2004

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As the external evaluator for Wildflowers Institute (WI) in 2004, I carried out participant observations at one WI fellows meeting and two site visits to local communities, conducted open-ended and semistructured interviews with almost all WI fellows and many participants in these programs, and maintained close e-mail and telephone exchange with Dr. Hanmin Liu. Based on information gathered during these activities, this report evaluates WI's U.S. programs in building socially sustainable communities, focusing on new developments and comparing them with WI's work in the previous year, which I observed closely but for which did not write a formal evaluation.

First I will review the development of the WI theory that has led to the shared new vision of building socially sustainable community and new strategies that placed even more emphasis on the inner strength of community leaders and residents. Next I will evaluate the two major WI tools in community building: the WI space and Vision-Building (VB), which WI fellows have developed in important ways. WI made learning programs and the training of youth leadership in 2004 top priorities and has made impressive progress on both fronts, thanks to the collective effort of WI fellows. The writing of a handbook for community building, the newest item on the WI agenda, has also involved WI fellows in developing the text content and two authors in participating in the WI process of community building. I conclude this evaluation report with remarks on the application of WI's theoretically informed initiative in its 2004 work, that is, the aim to empower community leaders so that they can change the way how people perceive and build their communities from an inside-out approach.

## **The New Vision and the Strategies**

The shared vision among WI fellows by 2003 revolved around three key points: (1) in order to move forward in their community-building work, both leaders and their communities need to undergo a process of cultural healing, (2) to reconstruct their identities, individuals and communities need to uncover the commonly held virtues and cultural premises (i.e., the commonly held expectations for individual, family, and community behaviors), and (3) through the discovery of these cultural premises, communities will be able to design and create social spaces—the centers of social gravity—where the individual, the family, and the community can grow. While agreeing on these three points, WI in 2004 developed a new vision of community building that aims at the social sustainability of the community, which, in my opinion, represents the most important achievement of the year.

According to this new vision, community leaders in the twenty-first century need to consider several elements. First, because social capitals are the limited resources that are under attack by rapid market expansion, and because the breakdown of family and community contribute to increasing inequality and other social dysfunctions, the preservation of social capital and the promotion of equality **are** essential to socially sustainable

development. Second, the teaching and learning of self-uplifting, self-organization, and self-reliance may be equally important, because the development of a community can be sustainable only when it ceases to rely on outside assistance and starts to grow from within. Third, the effort to discover who you are (or the construction of a collective identity for the community) therefore becomes a key to long-term development in both economic and social terms. Fourth, economic growth is critically important because a community experiencing prolonged poverty and economic difficulties cannot sustain itself either. In this connection, one must have a more balanced view of the marketplace because in today's world a community's economic sustainability cannot be achieved outside the market economy. Finally, a community cannot be sustainable if it is oppressive to individuals; a sustainable community has to achieve a good balance between individuals and the collective entity.

The vision of socially sustainable community builds on WI's emphasis on the role of culture in community building. However, this vision has gone beyond the initial stage of cultural healing and identity searching and aims to restore the balance between the core and interface cultures, between social and economic capitals, and ultimately, between the individual and the community. Methodologically, this new vision derives from WI's trademark "both/and" approach and continues to emphasize the internal strengths and virtues of a community in its long-term development.

Guided by this new vision, WI adopted two new strategies in 2004. The first new strategy provides more theoretical guidance in leadership training programs and other community work through the public lectures offered by Dr. Liu, the discussion sessions during community site visits, and the development of a curriculum handbook. The second new strategy creates more opportunities for WI fellows to develop their leadership capacity in actual practices of community building and, through these practices, to learn the significance of developing socially sustainable communities. The best example of the second strategy may be the well-planned program of youth leadership training in the Lao Iu Mien community in Oakland and the SoMa Filipino community in San Francisco. Senior WI fellows helped the youth leaders to grow and, at the same time, learned the necessity and importance of youth leadership for the future of the two communities. Through the close working relationship across the generational line, the previously rather abstract notion of social sustainability has become both concrete and practically necessary (see below).

## **The WI Space in 2004**

A powerful outcome of the WI process is the creation of a relational space—the WI space—whereby community leaders and residents feel safe and inspired to replenish, grow, and uncover/reconstruct relational spaces inside their community. The function of the WI space has long been recognized by WI fellows, who repeatedly asserted during interviews that it would be impossible for them to develop their leadership capacity without the WI space. Many fellows referred to the WI space as the "home" or family.

Based on the recollections of WI fellows, it seems to me that the WI space has undergone a series of developments. In the first stage, it was a most effective working space when WI fellows applied Vision-Building and other tools in a given community because community leaders who otherwise were divided by either ideological differences or factionalism were able to sit in a circle and discuss one another's model. In the second stage, which started in 2003 but became institutionalized in 2004, the WI space played an additional role as an important learning opportunity for WI fellows themselves because the moral support and intellectual contribution of other fellows constituted a key element in the leadership training program. The effectiveness of this learning space corresponds to the degree of safety and mutual trust felt among participants in the space, an ongoing process of mutual enforcement. For instance, unlike before, WI fellows engaged in open and sometimes heated debates over a variety of issues concerning community building during the October site visit to the Lao Iu Mien community in Oakland. The openness actually began at two fellows meetings that occurred in August and early October. During these two fellows meetings in 2004, participants engaged in a more theo-

retical exploration of the role of the WI space, which helped them to better appreciate the WI space and strengthened their sense of safety and mutual trust.

During the site visit to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April 2004, the WI space played a key role in bringing together the leaders of three local groups involved in community building. The visiting WI fellows formed the social fabric of the WI space, which made the local leaders feel safe and thus eager to open up for authentic intercommunity exchanges. According to my observation, the creation of a WI space for intercommunity exchanges among community leaders who have had no previous experience in the WI process, as shown in the Albuquerque site visit, was an important new development in 2004, because it implied that, like Vision-Building, the WI space can be used as an effective tool not only in WI community labs but also potentially anywhere.

Equally noteworthy is WI fellows' increased appreciation of the WI space. For instance, during the October site visit, two senior WI fellows in their formal presentation emphasized the centrality of the WI space in both their own growth as informal community leaders and the actual work they did in their communities. Their reflections were echoed by a number of participants, who all agreed that the WI space was one of the most valuable experiences of the past year and that they needed to cultivate the WI space. This marks a big step of progress for the inside-out approach as community leaders now chose to cultivate the WI space themselves rather than be taught to.

What remains unclear now is to what extent the cultivation of this space should rely on the institutional support of WI and the collective effort of WI fellows. Will one WI fellow be able to single-handedly create such a WI space for others to use? If it is possible for WI fellows to replicate the process, will it be possible for more community leaders to learn and apply it elsewhere?

## **The New Ways of Applying the Vision-Building Tool**

Since late 2002 I have been present at eleven half-day or daylong VB sessions, observing the VB tool in action in seven communities in the United States and China, while conducting on-site interviews with participants. I have become convinced that VB is not merely a tool but also a rewarding process of experiential learning and discovery, which explains why WI fellows never grow tired of using it again and again—some of them have done so countless times. During interviews, several WI fellows even suggested that every event should begin with a VB session, because it can effectively set the point of entry to a WI space that is constructed by the collective effort of all participants who are describing various aspects of their community (see the previous section).

In an earlier report I discussed the four major functions that the VB tool has performed thus far. The first is community mapping, which includes the mapping of social-cultural resources within a given community, especially when participants are asked to build a model to show the strengths and assets of their communities, and the mapping of community needs and “will,” when participants are asked to build a model to show what is important to them in a given community. In both cases, the VB tool can quickly mobilize participants to share their ideas, cultural expectations, and visions with one another and to identify the most valuable resources within their own community, such as virtues, social capitals, and informal leaders. The second function is to use the VB tool to present a narrative about either community history or personal journey, or a combination of both. The third function of the VB tool is to clarify one's mental framework by making the invisible (the logical links among the different parts and their relationships to the whole) literally visible through the arrangements of objects and figurines. This clarification function becomes more important when individuals try to express some rather abstract ideas through their models. Finally, I have also seen community leaders use the VB tool to examine a given issue or community event and to include both the descriptive and analysis parts in the same model. For instance, in August 2004 the leaders of the Filipino community of SoMa, San Francisco, used the VB tool to tell what happened at a community cultural festival when a large amount

of trash was left at the venue. They tried to find an appropriate interpretation for the lack of civility among fellow Filipinos and to scrutinize their core culture (for more detail, see Yan 2004, “The Vision-Building Tool in Action,” at [www.wildflowers.org](http://www.wildflowers.org)).

Of the four major functions of the VB tool, community mapping appears to be the most commonly used at site visits. It was also the first function to be designed by its inventor, Dr. Hanmin Liu (see Liu 2002, “Vision Building: Discovering Invisible Cultural Premises,” at [www.wildflowers.org](http://www.wildflowers.org)). The other functions, however, emerged one after the other in practice over the past two years. In 2004 WI senior fellows began not only to use the tool but also to explore its theoretical implications.

A major implication here is that the VB tool enables an unfolding process of discovery and experiential learning, and new developments surface each year. All of the four functions are used to express the individual model builder’s vision and will; yet what they eventually express always goes beyond the individual, revealing premises that are deeply held and shared in a given community. As the process goes deeper, users of the VB tool uncover and experiment with new ways of discovery, and consequently, the VB tool continues to show new development, seemingly taking a life of its own.

The key to understanding the dynamics and evolution of the VB tool again lies in WI’s theoretical framework. The VB tool is designed to let community leaders and residents uncover the cultural premises with their own strengths, and through the discovery process, participants gain not only knowledge about what to do but also the mental ability to do it. Because people discover the social capital, cultural premises, or center of gravity in their community, they also own it. So, in the end, what the VB tool does is to empower community leaders and people with both a mirror to reflect on themselves and a tool to rediscover their own culture. This is why WI fellows insist using VB tool regularly in their work and continue to apply it in new ways that often represent new developments in cultural discovery and community building.

## **The Transformation of the WI Site Visit and Fellows Meetings**

Although the project of “Studies 2000” featured site visits, visitors were mostly funders, NPO leaders, and government agencies from outside the Asian-American communities. The first WI site visit organized for informal community leaders took place when a group of WI fellows from different communities participated in a Filipino cultural celebration in the SoMa community in San Francisco on May 30, 2003. The June 2003 site visit to Frank’s Landing in Seattle, however, was the first organized study tour, with a clearly defined goal of learning community work and creating an important relational space for interethnic-group dialogue. Most participants began to address more general issues and to think about more cooperation across community boundaries, a new agenda that was to be pursued in the subsequent site visits in the year.

Continuing the 2003 agenda, the two site visits in 2004 reached a higher level of organizational sophistication and community empowerment. The April site visit to Native American communities in Albuquerque marked the first time that the local host designed specific programs and organized all activities. As a result, this site visit brought three local communities together; attracted university faculty, local artists, and NPO leaders; and experimented with new ways to conduct intercommunity exchanges. Unlike previous site visits, the Albuquerque visit also featured a central theme of multiple worlds that was put forward by a WI senior fellow: perceiving community culture in the context of concentric circles of social relations, ranging from the individual and family to the community and local society. Although the notion of multiple worlds still needs refinement, the fact that informal community leaders actively sought and built a theoretical framework of community building reveals one more angle of the empowerment function of the WI process and the fruit of the inside-out approach.

Youth leadership was the central theme during the October site visit to the Lao Iu Mien community in Oakland and the Filipino community of SoMa in San Francisco, with three subthemes: (1) generating a voice

among youth, (2) bridging the gap between youth and elders, and (3) creating space for youth. Like the Albuquerque site visit, local community leaders organized and ran this site visit under the guidance of the WI theory and tools; but unlike the Albuquerque site visit, a small group of youth leaders played a central role. The youth leaders worked out the central theme and subthemes with their mentors and Jennifer Mei and also introduced new organizational skills they had learned at college back to their own community. One of the direct results of this youth-organized site visit was the positive interaction between youth and elders and between the core and interface cultures. According to many participants, this site visit was the most efficient learning program they had experienced thus far.

The WI site visits in 2004 were characterized by self-organizing and experiential learning inside the local communities, both of which empowered local leaders and community members. It should also be noted that these two features were also present at the three WI fellows meetings that were held in San Francisco in 2004, where participants learned the WI concepts and theory, shared their experiences in community building, and discussed new ways to deepen their work. The fellows meetings paved the way for the actual organizational work of site visits, which once again showed the collective effort of all WI fellows who made the principles of self-organizing and learning from practice work.

Finally, some new learning techniques also underwent experimentation this year. For instance, senior WI fellows began to take more responsibilities in teaching, instead of merely learning. During the April site visit, several senior fellows joined Dr. Liu in a public lecture on the WI theory and answered audience questions. At formal presentations during the October site visit, two senior fellows discussed their own experiences in applying the WI framework in community work. Another experiment is to use the video clips of past Vision-Building sessions to facilitate and lead discussion sessions. Participants in these sessions were extremely attentive and intellectually inspired, because they can see their own intellectual growth from the mirror of the past video clips.

## Youth Leadership Training

The issue of youth leadership was first brought up in May 2003 and quickly became a priority on the WI agenda in 2004. After the April site visit to Albuquerque, which was attended by a relatively large number of youth, the focus was shifted to the capacity building of youth leaders. Through a number of WI meetings, a consensus emerged that the term “youth leadership” actually may mean different things in practice. One meaning referred to youth leaders as assistants of elder leaders, another as holding up a “youth mirror” to elders as a way to provide information about the needs of young people, and a third as learning to lead by taking more responsibilities in community work and by growing up intellectually. Although all of the meanings can be seen as capacities, the third was considered the most important in the long run. WI also realized that, to unleash the leadership capacity inside youth leaders, one needs to establish a mentoring relationship between senior leaders and youth.

The conceptual work produced the first fruitful result at the October site –visit, where the youth leaders obviously played a central role in organizing the event and leading the learning programs. As participants, youth were in charge of the whole event, and more important, young women took center stage during several community events. What was not obvious but equally important, however, was the mentorship behind the cultivation of youth leadership. The WI-led meetings of youth leaders, the strong support of youth leadership by community leaders, and the on-site advice provided by some senior fellows to youth leaders were just a few examples of mentorship.

Also noteworthy is the strong yet often less visible mentorship that Jennifer Mei offered to youth leaders. Over the past two years Ms. Mei has played a key role in overseeing several meetings of youth leaders, maintained a close mentoring relationship with Muang Saechao of the Iu Mien community, and, through which, gradually

cultivated a small group of young buds, namely, future youth leaders, in community leadership training. Unlike many male mentors who emphasized the formal aspects of leadership, Ms. Mei established a different model of mentorship that is more accessible and sensitive to the lives of youth leaders and the personal issues they are facing, thus adding a warm human touch to the mentorship practice.

The formation of mentorship is extremely important because, within the community boundary, youth leadership cannot grow without the support of senior leaders (it is possible for youth leaders to grow in the WI space because they are temporarily away from the context of power relationship in their own communities). Moreover, mentorship brings the two generations closer and may help reduce the generational gap and the gap between core and interface cultures. Furthermore, through mentorship, youth leadership grows from within the community. The emphasis on mentorship in youth leadership training comes from WI's faith in the inner strength and virtues of the people in a given community and its basic approach of building community from the inside out.

Among the seven WI community labs, the formation of mentorship varies from one to another, as do the roles mentors play. There is also a serious shortage of woman mentors because all but one WI senior fellow are men. How to develop mentorship as a replicable technique of leadership training and how to promote female mentorship seem to be the new challenges for WI.

## Curriculum Development

WI started a new project in 2004: creating a handbook of community building that draws directly from the experiences in the community labs. Professor Ben Davis and Ms. Annie Richard, a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at University of California at Berkeley, joined Dr. Liu to work with WI fellows to compile the handbook.

This project is noteworthy in several ways. First, in order to obtain firsthand experience about the WI framework and its practical application, the two authors participated in most WI activities throughout the year and engaged in extensive intellectual exchanges with WI fellows. Second, the authors set a **goal** that is quite difficult for them to achieve, that is, the handbook has to be accepted by the community leaders as a shared tool that also addresses the cultural specificities of each community from an inside-out approach. To reach this goal, they sent their drafts to WI fellows and gathered feedback from them. Third, reviewing the handbook has become a regular activity in recent WI learning programs, which stimulate WI fellows to learn the WI theory and tools from a new angle. And the review session often resulted in engaged discussions of the WI concepts and theory. As a result, the authors and WI fellows have scrutinized and developed several major concepts: the notions of interface culture, spirituality and ceremony, social sustainability, and the definition of community in the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

In this report I have briefly reviewed and evaluated the Wildflowers process of building sustainable communities in 2004. The term "Wildflowers process" refers to the collective efforts of Wildflowers Institute and its fellows to search for better ways to strengthen the family and community so that the community can be sustainable in both social and economic terms. This is an unfolding and dynamic process. In 2004, important progress was made in three areas.

First, the vision of building socially sustainable community represents a new development in the WI theory of community building, which previously focused on the goals of cultural healing and identity construction. This new vision has in turn guided WI to adopt several new strategies, chief among which are the enhanced theo-

retical guidance by WI and the shift of leadership responsibility to informal community leaders. Second, the existing WI tools, such as the WI space and Vision-Building, have been either extended to new areas of community building or applied in new ways. Third, the WI fellows meetings and site visits have been institutionalized as learning programs in which participants take the initiative to learn from one another and grow together.

These achievements share one thing in common: WI's theoretically informed initiative to build leadership capacities of informal community leaders and to recruit and cultivate youth leaders, especially young woman leaders. By "theoretically informed initiative," I mean WI's aim to empower community leaders from a culturally sensitive and inside-out approach, to change the way people perceive themselves and their communities, and eventually to change the way people build their communities. With its stated aim or mission in mind, I evaluated WI's work in 2004 and must conclude that the above-mentioned achievements are important and impressive.

The replication potentials of these 2004 achievements in both theoretical development and tool application remain to be seen because they are too recent and rely heavily on the continuing guidance of WI. How to standardize the tools and the procedures of tool application, such as the cultivation of the WI space, the use of Vision-Building, and the operation of WI learning programs (e.g., site visits and fellows meetings), constitutes a new challenge for WI. In this connection, the current effort to produce a handbook and to develop a curriculum of community building appears to be a promising solution. Other more practical issues, such as the promotion of mentorship and cultivation of more woman senior leaders in community building, also need to be addressed in 2005.

## **WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE MISSION STATEMENT**

For more than a quarter of a century, Wildflowers Institute has focused on leadership development and community building in the United States and abroad. We help communities uncover and utilize the strengths of the various cultures within the community. Wildflowers helps them plan, grow economically, and be more socially sustainable by:

**Discovering** the virtues, self-organizing principles, and formations of family and community and applying that understanding to the planning and development of programs, services, and policies

**Developing** leaders among youth and adults rooted in the cultures of the communities

**Designing** social spaces for civic engagement

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