

Evaluation of Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI)



Project for Civic Health



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Executive Summary

The Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI) is an innovative leadership program designed to equip city elected officials with collaborative leadership skills to address the complex challenges facing Washington State's cities and towns. Launched in 2024 by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center and the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, WA-CELI serves as a pilot initiative to enhance civic engagement, reduce polarization, and improve public policy outcomes.

WA-CELI's inaugural cohort included 45 elected officials representing diverse cities across the state, ensuring a balance of geographic, demographic, and political perspectives. The program's curriculum spanned five sessions, combining in-person and virtual learning to provide participants with tools for collaborative governance. Topics included managing conflict, framing discussions around shared interests, engaging the public, and sustaining collaborative relationships.

The program's impact was evaluated through a comprehensive pre- and post-program assessment, yielding both quantitative and qualitative insights. Key findings include:

- **Skill Development:** Participants reported significant improvements across ten collaborative leadership skills, including managing dynamics, framing discussions, and active listening. These skills contributed to enhanced teamwork and effective conflict management.
- **Sense of Belonging:** The program fostered stronger connections among participants, with increases in feeling supported by peers and a sense of belonging to their city or town. Relationships with other elected officials also improved significantly, reinforcing a shared identity as public servants.
- **Program Feedback:** Participants expressed high satisfaction, with 96% agreeing that WA-CELI helped them become better leaders and 94% stating they would recommend the program to others. The WA-CELI workbook and interactive activities, such as world café discussions, were particularly praised.

Participants highlighted WA-CELI's emphasis on relationship-building, practical tools, and diverse perspectives as transformative elements. Recommendations for improvement included offering more networking opportunities, enhancing follow-up engagement, and maintaining the program's focus on inclusivity and collaboration.

WA-CELI sets a strong precedent for fostering collaborative leadership among elected officials, offering a replicable model for improving civic health and addressing complex public policy challenges.

Thank you to our generous funders including the Ballmer Group, the AWC Center for Quality Communities, and private donors.

Introduction

Political polarization in the United States has reached unprecedented levels with the 2024 presidential election further exposing the widening ideological divides impacting public trust and effective governance. Relatedly, while trust in government is at an all-time low, trust in local government remains relatively high compared to trust in federal and state government. Higher trust in local government provides an opportunity space to combat polarization. This report provides an overview and evaluation of the 2024 Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute pilot, a program developed and offered by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center (a joint effort of Washington State University and the University of Washington) and the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy & Governance on behalf of the Association of Washington Cities (AWC) and the AWC Center for Quality Communities.

The Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI) is an evidence based, low cost, scalable program that addresses polarization by fostering a new collective identity among elected officials as public servants committed to the local public service. Rooted in social psychology and group process theory, WA-CELI creates a space where leaders from diverse political, geographic, and demographic backgrounds can build trust and mutual understanding. Instead of focusing directly on bridging divides, the program leverages participants' intrinsic desire to affiliate by emphasizing shared values and a common purpose. Through facilitated dialogue, collaborative exercises, and actionable strategies, WA-CELI equips leaders with the tools to navigate polarized environments, enabling them to co-create solutions to complex challenges. By cultivating a culture of collaboration and engagement and a shared commitment to civic health, WA-CELI helps reduce polarization and strengthen democratic governance in Washington State.

This program was originally envisioned during the Project for Civic Health 2023 Civic Health Summit, held in Renton, WA in October 2023. The Project for Civic Health is a partnership between the Washington State Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, and the Henry M. Jackson Foundation. During the 2023 summit, project partners gathered community and political leaders from across Washington gathered to think through how to uncover shared objectives and build more robust ways to strengthen our abilities to debate, discuss, and develop better solutions to what confronts us. More information on the Project for Civic Health, including details of the 2023 summit, can be found at <https://projectforcivichealth.org/>.

WA-CELI was designed by an expert facilitation team from the William D. Ruckelshaus Center and the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance with input from our partners at the Association for Washington Cities (AWC). The program is delivered as a four-month, immersive training program that provides small teams of city elected officials with the collaborative leadership skills to tackle real-world challenges facing our cities and towns. Under the guidance of expert facilitators, teams learn and practice a broad range of strategies to embrace differing viewpoints and build consensus to maximize success. In addition to receiving valuable training, participants have the opportunity to learn about challenges facing communities in other parts of

the state and build meaningful connections with peers invested in improving the civic health of Washington state.

WA-CELI was funded through a mix of grants, donations, and Ruckelshaus Center and UW Evans School operational funds. Thank you to our generous funders including the Ballmer Group, the AWC Center for Quality Communities, and private donors.

WA-CELI Participants

WA-CELI included 45 participants in city elected office (e.g. – mayor, city councilmember) from 14 teams from across Washington State. Participants were selected with guidance from AWC to ensure we had broad representation from across Washington State including mix of city sizes, city type (rural, suburban, urban), and form of government (council-manager and mayor-council), and political ideologies based on the districts in which people were elected. Figure 1 includes a map of WA-CELI participant cities broken out by AWC districts. A full list of participants and teams is given in Appendix A.

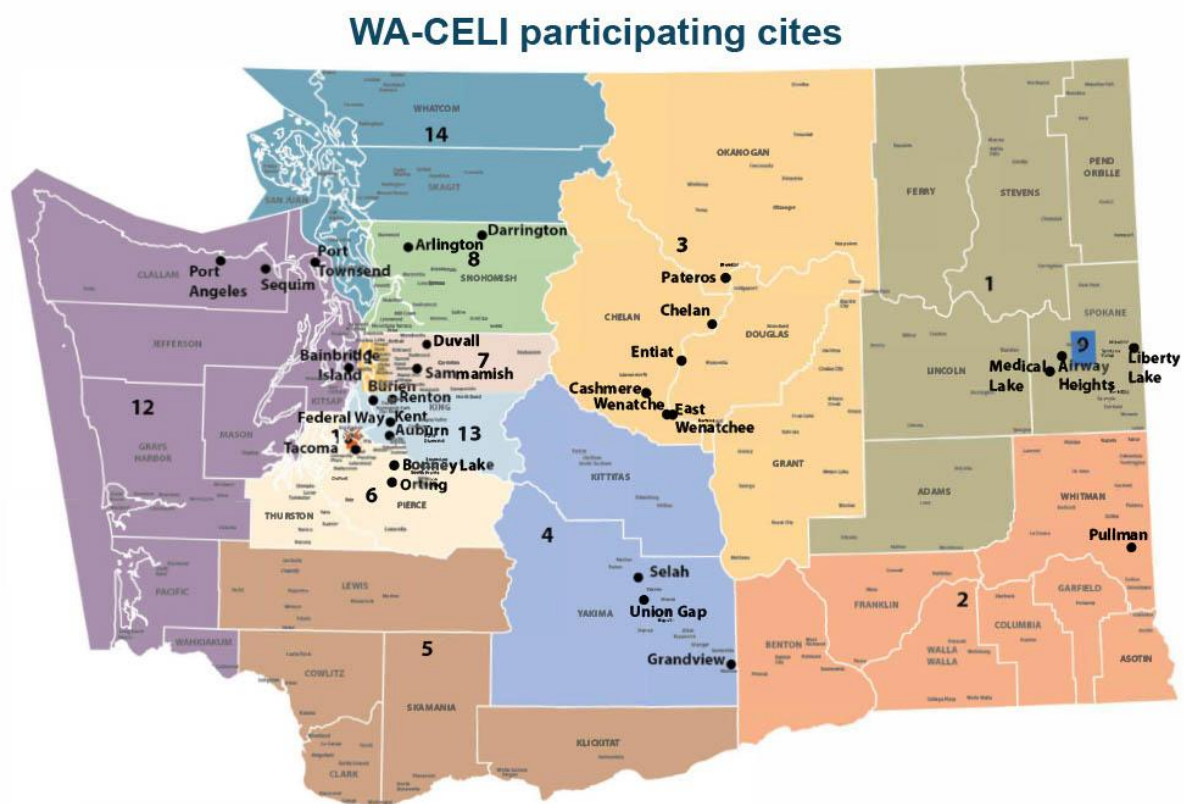


Figure 1. WA-CELI Participant Cites by AWC District

WA-CELI Design and Implementation Team

WA-CELI was designed by an expert facilitation team from the William D. Ruckelshaus Center and the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Governance with input from our partners at the Association for Washington Cities (AWC). WA-CELI facilitators are listed below and full bios for each facilitator can be found in Appendix B:

- Julia L. Carboni, PhD, Director, William D. Ruckelshaus Center
- Jed Chalupa, PhD, Senior Facilitator, William D. Ruckelshaus Center
- Becky Coriell, MEd, Director of Professional Learning Programs, UW Evans School of Public Policy and Governance
- AK Sterling, MA, Innovation and Engagement Manager, UW Evans School of Public Policy and Governance

The project was also supported by Ruckelshaus Center and UW Evans School staff and student interns including Ulla Johnson, Elizabeth Dickie, Dilyara Begalykyzy, Kayla Jiale Luo, and others.

Special thanks to Deanna Dawson, AWC CEO, and AWC Board Members Nancy Backus (Mayor, Auburn), Fred Brink (Mayor Pro Tem, West Richland), Amy Howard (Deputy Mayor, Port Townsend), Matthew Lundh (Mayor Cle Elum), and Betsy Wilkerson (Council President, Spokane) who served as focus group participants to help refine program topics and content. Their insights were invaluable.

WA-CELI Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes included a broad range of collaborative leadership skills and are listed below:

- Examine how to move from hierarchical to collaborative leadership
- Understand how to manage collaborative dynamics and embrace conflict as a tool for change
- Practice framing discussions around interests instead of positions
- Explore ways to engage the public and communicate compromise to your constituents
- Discover strategies for evaluating collaborative process and outcomes
- Learn how to maintain collaborative relationships over time

WA CELI Purpose and Program Theory of Change

The purpose of WA-CELI is to enhance build collaborative leadership capacity among elected officials, enhance civic engagement, and reduce polarization in Washington State by fostering a shared identity as public servants, resulting in improved civic health and better public policy outcomes for everyone who lives, works, and plays in Washington State.

WA-CELI's theory of change is grounded in group process and social psychology, leveraging the innate human desire to affiliate. Instead of immediately focusing on "bridging divides," the

program fosters a shared identity among participants as "public servants," creating a foundation of trust and collaboration. This approach contrasts with traditional methods that emphasize addressing differences directly, which can often reinforce divisions. By uniting leaders around a common purpose, the program enables elected officials to transcend political divides, develop collaborative practices, and ultimately reduce polarization while enhancing civic health in Washington State.

See Appendix C for the WA-CELI logic model.

WA-CELI Session Dates¹, Locations, and Topics

We purposefully moved WA-CELI in person sessions around the state to reflect that this is a statewide program and to minimize travel for some participants at each session. We held sessions on Washington State University and University of Washington campuses around the state to reflect facilitation team ties to each university and to minimize costs as campus facilities are less expensive than private facilities and have fewer requirements in terms of contracts.

Session 1- UW Spokane- July 26-27, 2024

- Understanding collaborative leadership in context including moving from hierarchical leadership to collaborative leadership and embracing conflict as a tool for change
- Learning how to frame issues from a systems perspective for collaborative process
- What issue will your team's city tackle? We will incorporate this into all remaining workshops.

Session 2- Virtual- August 22-23, 2024

- Identifying, engaging, and incentivizing actors necessary for successful collaboration to bring them to the collaborative table

Session 3- WSU Everett- September 27-28, 2024

- Designing the collaborative process for maximum success
- Designing meetings for effective collaboration
- Framing discussions around interests instead of positions
- Understanding and managing collaborative dynamics, including conflict

Session 4- Virtual- October 1-2, 2024

- Engaging the public and communicating compromise and collaboration to constituents

Session 5- WSU-Tri-Cities- October 18, 2024

- Evaluating collaborative process and outcomes
- Maintaining collaborative relationships over time

Post Session Capstone- AWC 2025 Annual Conference (Kennewick)- June 2025

- Tell us about the progress you've made!

¹ Dates are not perfectly staggered as we had to plan around religious holidays, city council meeting days, and the Apple Cup.

WA-CELI Budget

The 2024 WA-CELI pilot cost approximately \$158,500 to develop and implement. Costs include staff salaries and benefits (\$82,000), curriculum development and course material production (\$11,000), venue rental and catering (\$11,500), travel costs for facilitators and participants including airfare or mileage, hotel, and per diem for meals not included in the training (\$36,000), and facilities and administrative costs (overhead/indirect costs) (\$18,000). A detailed budget can be provided upon request.

The pilot was funded through a mix of grants, private donations, and operational funds from the Ruckelshaus Center, UW Evans School, and AWC Center for Quality Communities. We are deeply grateful for external funders- including the Ballmer group- as this program would not have been possible without them.

Evaluation

The Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI) employed a pre-post retrospective analysis to measure the program's impact on participants. This evaluation method allowed participants to reflect on their baseline abilities at the program's conclusion, providing a clearer understanding of the changes in their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The response rate for the survey was 78%, which is very high for program evaluation surveys. The evaluation data suggest that WA-CELI significantly enhanced participants' leadership skills, collaborative abilities, and sense of belonging within their communities and among peers. Detailed findings are provided below.

The analysis aimed to achieve three key objectives. First, it assessed the program's effectiveness in fostering collaborative leadership skills, equipping participants to better manage group dynamics and resolve conflicts. Second, it examined shifts in participants' identification with the shared role of "public servant," an identity promoted by WA-CELI to transcend political divides. Finally, it evaluated changes in trust, communication skills, and collaboration among elected officials representing diverse political and geographic backgrounds.

To collect data, participants were asked to rate their perceived competency levels in several areas, including collaborative leadership, conflict resolution, and civic engagement. These ratings were provided at two points: their reflective "pre-program" state and their post-program state. A Likert-style scale, ranging from 1 ("Not at all confident") to 5 ("Very confident"), captured these shifts quantitatively. Additionally, open-ended survey questions gathered qualitative feedback, offering deeper insights into participants' experiences and the program's overall impact.

This methodology allowed for both measurable results and rich narrative accounts, creating a comprehensive understanding of WA-CELI's effectiveness in achieving its goals.

See Appendix D for the survey instrument.

Findings

The Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI) demonstrated substantial success in enhancing collaborative leadership skills among participants, equipping them with practical tools to navigate complex leadership challenges effectively. Participants reported a deeper understanding of the distinction between hierarchical and collaborative leadership, as well as improved abilities to manage group dynamics and embrace conflict as an opportunity for positive change. They also developed stronger skills in framing discussions around shared interests, engaging the public, and effectively communicating compromises. The program fostered long-term relationship-building, enhanced active listening, and empowered participants to engage in constructive conversations across ideological divides. These outcomes highlight WA-CELI's effectiveness in fostering a well-rounded and impactful skill set for collaborative leadership.

Collaborative Leadership Skills

WA-CELI participants demonstrated significant improvements in leadership and collaboration skills, as evidenced by pre- and post-program assessments. One of the most notable areas of growth was in understanding the difference between hierarchical and collaborative leadership, where participants' scores increased from a mean of 2.97 to 3.97². This indicates a stronger grasp of collaborative approaches and their application in leadership contexts.

Participants also advanced their abilities in managing collaborative dynamics, with mean scores rising from 2.65 to 3.63. These improvements reflect the program's effectiveness in equipping individuals with tools to navigate group interactions and enhance teamwork. Similarly, the skill of embracing conflict as a tool for positive change saw marked improvement, with scores increasing from 2.70 to 3.80. This growth highlights participants' newfound confidence in addressing and leveraging conflict constructively.

Another critical area of development was the ability to frame discussions around shared interests rather than fixed positions. Scores in this area increased from 2.97 to 4.00, demonstrating participants' enhanced capacity for fostering consensus and solution-oriented dialogue. Public engagement skills also improved, with mean scores rising from 2.83 to 3.77, indicating participants' increased effectiveness in connecting with and involving their communities.

Communication strategies, particularly in conveying compromises to constituents, improved from 2.60 to 3.57. Participants also developed greater proficiency in evaluating collaborative processes and outcomes, with scores increasing from 2.53 to 3.50. These gains highlight their ability to assess the effectiveness of joint efforts critically.

The program further strengthened participants' ability to maintain long-term collaborative relationships, with scores increasing from 2.93 to 3.72. This reflects their enhanced capacity to build trust and sustain productive partnerships over time. Engaging in constructive conversations

² Reported scores are the mean of all responses.

with people holding differing viewpoints also saw significant growth, with mean scores rising from 3.00 to 3.83.

Finally, active listening emerged as one of the most transformative areas of development, with scores improving from 3.30 to 4.07. Participants highlighted this skill as crucial in enhancing their communication effectiveness and fostering stronger interpersonal connections. Overall, these improvements underscore WA-CELI's success in fostering a well-rounded set of leadership and collaboration capabilities among participants.

Skill	Pre-program Mean	Post-program Mean
Understanding the Difference Between Hierarchical and Collaborative Leadership	2.97	3.97
Managing Collaborative Dynamics	2.65	3.63
Embracing Conflict as a Tool for Change	2.70	3.80
Framing Discussions Around Interests Instead of Positions	2.97	4.00
Engaging the Public	2.83	3.77
Communicating Compromise to Constituents	2.60	3.57
Evaluating Collaborative Processes and Outcomes	2.53	3.50
Maintaining Collaborative Relationships Over Time	2.93	3.72
Having Conversations with People Who Disagree	3.00	3.83
Active Listening	3.30	4.07

Table 1. Collaborative Leadership Skills

Sense of Belonging

Participants in WA-CELI reported significant increases in their sense of belonging across multiple dimensions, as reflected in pre- and post-program assessments. One key area of growth was participants' feeling of belonging to their city or town, where the mean score increased from 4.26 to 4.59. This indicates a deeper connection to their communities developed through the program.

Participants also felt more appreciated and recognized for their contributions, with scores rising from 3.74 to 4.30. Confidence in having a meaningful role in addressing local issues improved as well, with scores increasing from 4.30 to 4.48, showcasing greater assurance in their ability to tackle local challenges.

The program fostered stronger peer support among participants in leadership roles, with scores increasing from 3.89 to 4.19. Similarly, relationships with other elected leaders and stakeholders were significantly strengthened, as evidenced by an increase from 3.67 to 4.22.

Participants also developed greater confidence in their ability to engage in collaborative leadership, with scores rising from 3.67 to 4.44. Inclusivity and respect for diverse perspectives improved, with scores moving from 3.33 to 3.81, reflecting a more welcoming environment for differing viewpoints.

In leading complex policy discussions, participants demonstrated enhanced skills, with scores increasing from 3.41 to 4.33. Finally, confidence in engaging in dialogue with individuals holding differing political ideologies saw substantial growth, with scores rising from 3.78 to 4.44. These results underscore WA-CELI's success in fostering a stronger sense of belonging and collaborative capacity among its participants.

Dimension	Pre-program Mean	Post-program Mean
Feeling a Strong Sense of Belonging to City or Town	4.26	4.59
Feeling That Contributions Were Valued	3.74	4.30
Belief in Having a Meaningful Role in Addressing Local Issues	4.30	4.48
Feeling Supported by Peers in Leadership Roles	3.89	4.19
Feeling Connected to Other Elected Leaders and Stakeholders	3.67	4.22
Confidence in Engaging in Collaborative Leadership	3.67	4.44
Belief That Diverse Perspectives Were Welcomed and Respected	3.33	3.81
Confidence in Leading Discussions on Complex Policy Issues	3.41	4.33
Ability to Dialogue with People Who Have Different Political Ideologies	3.78	4.44

Table 2. Sense of Belonging

Program Impact

The WA-CELI program received overwhelmingly positive evaluations from participants, as reflected in their responses to various impact statements. On a 5-point scale, participants consistently rated the program highly across all measures, demonstrating its effectiveness in fostering leadership, collaboration, and a sense of belonging.

Participants strongly agreed that WA-CELI provided them with tools and strategies for more effective collaboration, achieving a high mean score of 4.59. Similarly, the program was widely regarded as a productive use of participants' time, with a mean score of 4.63, and as instrumental in improving leadership capabilities, also scoring 4.59. The ability to address community challenges was another area of growth, reflected in a mean score of 4.63.

The program's impact on fostering a sense of belonging was particularly notable. Participants reported an increased sense of belonging among their AWC peers, which achieved the highest mean score of 4.81. Additionally, the program strengthened participants' sense of connection to their city government (4.26) and their city or town (4.19).

WA-CELI was also commended for helping participants build relationships with other elected leaders in Washington, scoring a mean of 4.78. The usefulness of the WA-CELI workbook was acknowledged with a mean score of 4.48, and participants expressed a strong willingness to recommend the program to others, reflected in a mean score of 4.74. Lastly, participants affirmed that the program met their expectations, scoring 4.44.

These results highlight WA-CELI's success in equipping participants with practical skills, fostering meaningful connections, and delivering a highly impactful and engaging experience for elected leaders.

Statement	Min Score	Max Score	Mean Score
WA-CELI provided me with tools and strategies for more effective collaboration.	3.00	5.00	4.59
WA-CELI was a productive use of my time.	2.00	5.00	4.63
WA-CELI helped me become a better leader.	3.00	5.00	4.59
WA-CELI improved my ability to address community challenges.	3.00	5.00	4.63
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging among my AWC peers.	3.00	5.00	4.81
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging in my city government.	3.00	5.00	4.26
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging in my city or town.	3.00	5.00	4.19
WA-CELI helped me build relationships with other elected leaders in Washington.	4.00	5.00	4.78
The WA-CELI workbook was useful.	1.00	5.00	4.48
I would recommend WA-CELI to other elected leaders.	2.00	5.00	4.74
WA-CELI met my expectations.	2.00	5.00	4.44

Table 3. Program Impact

Open Ended Questions

What specific skills or insights did you gain from WA-CELI that you apply in your current elected leadership role?

Participants shared a wealth of specific skills and insights gained from WA-CELI that they have already applied in their roles as elected leaders. A recurring theme was the development of active listening skills, which proved invaluable in engaging with constituents, particularly in challenging or emotionally charged situations. Participants emphasized that these skills enhanced their ability to communicate effectively with colleagues, city staff, and community members.

Another significant takeaway was the focus on collaboration and conflict resolution. Participants reported learning to embrace conflict as a tool for growth and to approach disagreements with curiosity and a solution-oriented mindset. Participatory methodologies like the world café and proaction café were highlighted as impactful methods for fostering inclusive dialogue and co-creating solutions with diverse groups.

Participants also mentioned gaining insights into meeting planning and process design, including the importance of preparing thoroughly, engaging the right stakeholders, and setting clear goals for discussions. Several noted that WA-CELI helped them build confidence in addressing complex leadership dynamics, particularly in areas like public engagement, decision-making, and fostering community collaboration.

Overall, participants credited WA-CELI with providing them with practical tools, frameworks, and a renewed sense of confidence in their roles. They expressed that these learnings have already had a tangible impact on how they approach leadership, collaboration, and community problem-solving.

What specific aspects of the WA-CELI program contributed most to your development as a collaborative leader?

Participants identified several aspects of the WA-CELI program as pivotal to their development as collaborative leaders. One of the most frequently mentioned elements was the opportunity to work in mixed teams and breakout groups, which provided a safe and supportive environment to practice collaborative techniques. These exercises fostered trust, encouraged dialogue, and allowed participants to learn from the experiences and perspectives of others across different regions.

The stories and insights shared by facilitators were another critical component, offering practical examples and relatable lessons in leadership and collaboration. Many participants cited these narratives as invaluable in understanding how to navigate complex challenges and apply learned frameworks to real-world scenarios.

Hands-on activities, such as role-playing, group exercises, and protocols like the world café, were highlighted as instrumental in building practical skills. These activities not only facilitated engagement but also allowed participants to experiment with new approaches to collaboration in a structured and reflective manner.

Participants also emphasized the importance of the in-person sessions, which provided a foundation for relationship-building and deeper connections among peers. The collaborative environment created during these sessions helped participants feel less isolated in their roles and strengthened their sense of shared purpose as elected leaders.

Other key factors included the WA-CELI workbook, which participants found to be a useful resource for structuring processes and retaining learnings, and the diverse and skilled facilitators, whose expertise and openness were credited with creating a welcoming and enriching learning experience.

Overall, participants attributed their growth as collaborative leaders to the program's combination of structured methodologies, interactive activities, and the supportive community it fostered, which provided them with both the tools and confidence to apply these lessons in their leadership roles.

In what ways, if any, could WA-CELI do a better job to foster a sense of belonging and collaboration among participants?

Not much was suggested to improve WA-CELI on these dimensions. Participants generally praised WA-CELI for fostering a strong sense of belonging and collaboration among participants, with many expressing that the program already excelled in this area. Several emphasized the importance of the opening and closing circle times, which helped build trust and connection quickly by allowing participants to share their personal stories and experiences. These interactions were seen as instrumental in creating a cohesive group dynamic.

For areas of improvement, some participants suggested introducing more after-hours activities, such as informal mingling or focused discussions, to deepen relationships outside of the structured sessions. Events like the Session 1 reception after the training were specifically highlighted as successful opportunities for connecting with peers in a more casual setting.

Another recurring suggestion was to establish mechanisms for long-term connections after the program. Ideas included creating a buddy system between participants from different cities or organizing monthly virtual check-ins to maintain the relationships and collaboration sparked during the program.

Participants also recommended incorporating a mix of small and large group activities to start each day, rather than relying solely on circle discussions, to keep the format dynamic. Additionally, some suggested spending less time on icebreakers and more on substantive exercises or discussions to maximize the limited time available during sessions.

Overall, while participants felt that WA-CELI already did an excellent job fostering collaboration and belonging, these suggestions for additional activities, sustained engagement, and varied formats could enhance the program further. The consistent praise for the program's design and facilitation underscores its success in creating a welcoming and collaborative environment for elected leaders.

What was your favorite part of WA-CELI?

Participants highlighted a wide range of favorite aspects of WA-CELI, reflecting the program's multifaceted impact. A recurring theme was the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with fellow elected leaders from across the state. Many participants expressed that connecting with peers who shared similar challenges and exchanging ideas created a strong sense of camaraderie and mutual support. These connections helped combat the isolation often felt in leadership roles and provided fresh perspectives on addressing common issues.

The interactive and hands-on activities, such as the Lego city-building exercise, role-playing, and world café discussions, were frequently mentioned as standout moments. These activities fostered creativity, collaboration, and deep engagement while allowing participants to practice new skills in a supportive environment.

Participants also appreciated the facilitators' stories and insights, which provided practical lessons and relatable examples of leadership challenges. The facilitators were praised for their expertise, openness, and ability to create a safe space for learning and dialogue.

The program's in-person sessions were another favorite, particularly the breakout group work and city-specific discussions. Participants valued the opportunity to collaborate with their city teams and to work through real-world challenges using the tools and frameworks introduced during the program.

Many participants also noted the diversity of perspectives in the room as a highlight. Engaging with leaders from different regions and backgrounds helped broaden their understanding of complex issues and enriched their learning experience.

Overall, participants described WA-CELL as an exceptional program, with many struggling to identify a single favorite aspect due to the program's comprehensive and impactful design. The combination of relationship-building, interactive learning, and practical insights made WA-CELL a deeply rewarding experience for its participants.

Conclusions

The inaugural Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELL) proved to be a transformative experience for participants, equipping elected officials with the tools and strategies to excel as collaborative leaders. Through an expertly designed curriculum, hands-on activities, and an emphasis on building a shared identity as public servants, WA-CELL successfully enhanced participants' leadership skills, sense of belonging, and ability to navigate complex challenges.

Quantitative evaluations highlighted significant improvements across key leadership and collaboration competencies, such as active listening, managing collaborative dynamics, and framing discussions around shared interests. Participants also reported strengthened relationships with peers, an increased sense of community within their cities and towns, and a renewed confidence in addressing local and statewide challenges.

Qualitative feedback reinforced the program's impact, with participants praising the practical tools, real-world applicability, and opportunities for meaningful engagement with a diverse cohort of leaders. Recommendations for additional after-hours networking opportunities and sustained engagement beyond the program demonstrate a strong desire among participants to extend the benefits of WA-CELL.

Overall, WA-CELL represents a groundbreaking initiative in fostering civic collaboration and reducing polarization in Washington State. By focusing on relationship-building, practical skill development, and a shared commitment to public service, the program lays a solid foundation for long-term improvements in civic health and policy outcomes across the state. The pilot's success serves as a model for future iterations and potential replication in other regions.

Next Steps

The next step for the inaugural WA-CELL cohort is the development of a Community of Practice (CoP) led by the WA-CELL facilitators. The CoP will provide ongoing opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of participatory methodologies and engage in

discussions about policy and community issues they face. In addition, the inaugural cohort will reconvene at various Association of Washington Cities (AWC) events in 2025, including a breakfast during City Action Days in Olympia, WA, in February, and capstone presentations on their WA-CELI experience and subsequent work at the AWC Conference in Kennewick, WA, in June.

Preparations are also underway for a second WA-CELI cohort, in partnership with AWC, incorporating insights from the inaugural program evaluation to refine the curriculum. Recruitment for the next cohort will begin in February 2025, with the program set to launch in July 2025. Upon completion, each cohort will join the existing Community of Practice, fostering cross-cohort interactions and statewide network building. Additionally, we are exploring mentorship opportunities for inaugural cohort members to support and guide the second cohort.

Appendices

- Appendix A: WA-CELI Inaugural Cohort Participants (2024)
- Appendix B: WA-CELI Facilitators
- Appendix C: Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI) Logic Model
- Appendix D: Participant Evaluation Survey

Appendix A: WA-CELI Inaugural Cohort Participants (2024)

Team 1: Auburn Mayor Nancy Backus, Kent Mayor Dana Ralph, Renton Mayor Armondo Pavone

Team 2: Arlington Mayor Don Vanney, Arlington Councilmember Michele Blythe, Arlington Councilmember Leisha Nobach, Darrington Mayor Dan Rankin

Team 3: East Wenatchee Mayor Jerrilea Crawford, Wenatchee Councilmember Chelsea Ewer

Team 4: Port Townsend Deputy Mayor Amy Howard, Port Townsend Councilmember Monica MickHager, Port Townsend Councilmember Owen Rowe

Team 5: Pullman Mayor Francis Benjamin, Pullman Councilmember Trymaine Gaither, Pullman Councilmember Ann Parks

Team 6: Grandview Mayor Ashley Lara, Selah Mayor Roger Bell, Selah Councilmember Michael Costello, Union Gap Councilmember Julie Schilling

Team 7: Bonney Lake Mayor Terry Carter, Bonney Lake Councilmember Gwendolyn Fullerton, Orting Mayor Josh Penner, Orting Councilmember Jeff Sproul

Team 8: Bainbridge Island Councilmembers Kirsten Hytopoulos, Ashley Mathews, and Leslie Schneider

Team 9: Cashmere Mayor James Fletcher, Chelan Mayor Erin McCardle, Entiat Mayor Renee Swearingen

Team 10: Duvall Mayor Pro Tempore Amy McHenry, Duvall Councilmember Ronn Mercer

Team 11: Port Angeles Councilmember Drew Schwab, Sequim Councilmember Harmony Rutter

Team 12: Sammamish Councilmembers Roisin O'Farrell, Pam Stuart, and Sid Gupta

Team 13: Tacoma Deputy Mayor John Hines, Tacoma Councilmember Sarah Rumbaugh

Team 14: Liberty Lake Mayor Cris Kaminskis, Liberty Lake Councilmember Annie Kurtz, Medical Lake Mayor Terri Cooper, Airway Heights Councilmember Jennifer Morton

Team 15: Burien Councilmembers Sarah Moore, Alex Andrade, and Linda Akey

Appendix B: WA-CELI Facilitator Biographies

Julia L. Carboni

Julia is Director of the William D Ruckelshaus Center, a joint effort between Washington State University and the University of Washington that assists stakeholders with developing collaborative, durable, and effective solutions for complex policy challenges. She is also a full professor in the Washington State University School of Politics, Philosophy, and Public Affairs and a distinguished scholar at the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. Dr. Carboni is an award-winning community engaged scholar and leader with expertise in using collaboration and asset-based community development to improve the lives and wellbeing of communities. She serves or has served on the Board of Directors for international, national, and local organizations, has extensive community-based volunteer experience, and also regularly mentors fellow BIPOC and female scholars and community leaders.

Jed Chalupa

Jed is a lead facilitator at the Ruckelshaus Center. He focuses on collaborative capacity-building efforts throughout Washington and the Pacific Northwest. Jed brings over eight years of experience in facilitation, engagement, conflict management, and training/teaching. He holds certifications in both Mediation and Women and Gender Studies. His work has regularly focused on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion within public engagement efforts. Jed completed his bachelor's degree in communication studies with a minor in peace and reconciliation, and his master's in communication studies with a specialization in deliberative processes from Colorado State University in 2015 and 2018, respectively. He is currently completing the final stages of his Ph.D. in Communication Studies with focuses on engagement and conflict management from Texas A&M University.

Becky Corriell

Becky is the director of Professional Learning Programs for the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance. Becky's work focuses on the creation of professional learning opportunities that are intentionally co-designed to advance personal, organizational, and collective learning. She has more than fifteen years of experience in teaching and training, program design and implementation, and organizational development. Becky also brings a deep commitment towards anti-racism, equity, and inclusion to all facets of her work. She holds a bachelor's degree in international studies and a Master of Education in Educational Leadership & Policy from the University of Washington. She is currently finalizing her doctoral dissertation in Education Policy, Organizations, & Leadership, also at UW.

AK Sterling

AK is an innovation & engagement manager within the Evans Policy Innovation Collaborative, a policy lab embedded at the Evans School of Public Policy & Governance. His work focuses on providing project management and internal & external engagement support. He has eight years of experience working in communications, community engagement, partnership development, and project management in higher education, focusing on building deep relationships with stakeholders, students, and community members to advance access to higher education and close opportunity gaps. AK holds a bachelor's degree in communication from Washington State University and a Master of Communication in Communities & Networks from the University of Washington.

Appendix C: WA-CELI Logic Model

Purpose: To enhance build collaborative leadership capacity among elected officials, enhance civic engagement, and reduce polarization in Washington State by fostering a shared identity as public servants, resulting in improved civic health and better public policy outcomes for everyone who lives, works, and plays in Washington State.

Theory of Change: WA-CELI's theory of change is grounded in group process and social psychology, leveraging the innate human desire to affiliate. Instead of immediately focusing on "bridging divides," the program fosters a shared identity among participants as "public servants," creating a foundation of trust and collaboration. This approach contrasts with traditional methods that emphasize addressing differences directly, which can often reinforce divisions. By uniting leaders around a common purpose, the program enables elected officials to transcend political divides, develop collaborative practices, and ultimately reduce polarization while enhancing civic health in Washington State.

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short Term Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long Term Outcomes
• Funding from the AWC Center for Quality Communities, William D. Ruckelshaus Center, UW Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, and other donors. • Staff and faculty expertise in collaborative governance, leadership development, and adult education • Staff and faculty time • Curriculum materials on collaborative leadership • Event and training logistics (venues, technology for virtual sessions, etc.). • Recruitment and outreach to elected officials across political and geographic spectrums in partnership with AWC.	• Develop and deliver a curriculum focused on collaborative leadership, systems thinking, and conflict resolution. • Focus groups with elected officials to refine curriculum • Host training sessions for elected officials, emphasizing collaborative leadership, community building, and practical skill-building. • Conduct pre- and post-event evaluations to assess impact and improve the program. • Provide ongoing Community of Practice to participants after training concludes • Publish and disseminate findings and best practices from the program.	• 45 city elected participants trained • 5 training sessions (3 in person and 2 virtual) • Training workbook • Best practices guide • Community of Practice • Pilot program evaluation	• Understand how to move from hierarchical to collaborative leadership • Understand how to manage collaborative dynamics and embrace conflict as a tool for change • Practice framing discussions around interests instead of positions • Explore ways to engage the public and communicate compromise to your constituents • Discover strategies for evaluating collaborative process and outcomes • Learn how to maintain collaborative relationships over time • Improve trust and relationships among elected officials from different political parties and regions.	• Elected leaders implement collaborative practices in their policymaking roles. • Reduced polarization and increased bipartisan collaboration in local and state governance. • Enhanced community engagement in decision-making processes.	• Improved civic health metrics in Washington State, such as increased public trust in government and higher voter engagement. • Policies and programs that better address complex state issues through collaborative problem-solving. • A replicable model of elected leader collaboration for other states and regions.

Appendix D: Participant Evaluation Survey

(This survey was administered through Qualtrics, an online survey platform, to participants email addresses. Each respondent had a unique link.)

Thank you for participating in the Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute (WA-CELI)! This survey aims to gather feedback on your experiences and the impact of the program on your collaborative leadership skills. Your responses will help us understand how WA-CELI has influenced your approach to leadership and collaboration, and they will guide future program improvements. The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, and your feedback will remain confidential. Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. We will be in touch soon with a summary report and next steps for our WA-CELI community of practice.

Collaborative Leadership Skills

Please indicate your skill level in the following areas **BEFORE** WA-CELI.

	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)	Very good (4)	Excellent (5)
Understanding the difference between hierarchical and collaborative leadership (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Managing collaborative dynamics (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Embracing conflict as a tool for change (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Framing discussions around interests instead of positions (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Engaging the public (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Communicating compromise to your constituents (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Evaluating collaborative process and outcomes (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintaining collaborative relationships over time. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Having conversations with people who disagree with me. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Active listening (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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Please indicate your skill level in the following areas **AFTER** WA-CELI.

	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Good (3)	Very good (4)	Excellent (5)
Understanding the difference between hierarchical and collaborative leadership (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Managing collaborative dynamics (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Embracing conflict as a tool for change (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Framing discussions around interests instead of positions (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Engaging the public (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Communicating compromise to your constituents (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Evaluating collaborative process and outcomes (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintaining collaborative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

relationships over
time. (8)

Having conversations
with people who
disagree with me. (9)

Active listening (10)



Sense of Belonging

Please indicate how you felt **BEFORE** WA-CELI.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I felt a strong sense of belonging to my city or town. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that my contributions were valued by others in my city or town. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believed that I had a meaningful role in addressing local issues in my city or town. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt supported by peers and colleagues in leadership roles in my city or town. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt connected to other elected leaders and stakeholders in my city or town. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was confident in my ability to engage in collaborative leadership in my city or town. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believed that diverse perspectives were welcomed and respected in my city or town. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was confident in leading discussions on complex policy issues in my city or town. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was able to have dialogue with people who have a different political ideology than me. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate how you felt **AFTER** WA-CELL.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel a strong sense of belonging to my city or town. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that my contributions were valued by others in my city or town. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe that I had a meaningful role in addressing local issues in my city or town. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel supported by peers and colleagues in leadership roles in my city or town. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel connected to other elected leaders and stakeholders in my city or town. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am confident in my ability to engage in collaborative leadership. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe that diverse perspectives were welcomed and respected in my city or town. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am confident in leading discussions on complex policy issues in my city or town. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am able to have dialogue with people who have a different political ideology than me. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Program Impact

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
WA-CELI provided me with tools and strategies for more effective collaboration. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI was a productive use of my time. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI helped me become a better leader. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI improved my ability to address community challenges. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging among my AWC peers. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging in my city government. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI increased my sense of belonging in my city or town. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI helped me build relationships with other elected leaders in Washington. (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The WA-CELI workbook was useful. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would recommend WA-CELI to other elected leaders. (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
WA-CELI met my expectations. (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Open Ended Questions:

- What specific skills or insights did you gain from WA-CELI that you apply in your current elected leadership role?
- What specific aspects of the WA-CELI program contributed most to your development as a collaborative leader?
- In what ways, if any, could WA-CELI do a better job to foster a sense of belonging and collaboration among participants?
- What was your favorite part of WA-CELI?
- What improvements would you suggest for future WA-CELI programs?
- Anything else you'd like to add?

Demographic Questions:

- City:
- Years in Elected Office