



Center for Leadership Equity

A Community Model of Professional
Development: An Early Exploration of
Effectiveness

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PROJECT
EVIDENT

Executive Summary

The United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey's Center for Leadership Equity (CLE) was launched to confront long-standing structural barriers facing nonprofit leaders and organizations in Greater Philadelphia. CLE's programmatic theory is simple: Stronger leaders make stronger organizations – and when organizations thrive, communities are stronger. To support this mission, CLE provides access to and investment in high-quality, responsively curated and tailored programs that support leadership enhancement and development, while also supporting mental health and well-being among members.

CLE's inaugural partnership with the Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia (BNCEP) has grown into a robust and active community of more than 350 nonprofit leaders. BNCEP is not a typical cohort program; it functions as a dynamic community and network built on intentional infrastructure.

This report was undertaken to explore early evidence of CLE's work through its implementation of the BNCEP program. Through focus groups, survey deployment, and a review of existing data, this report examines when and how CLE strengthens leaders and organizations. The report is divided into three sections:

- **Section One – A Community Model for Leadership Development:** Through BNCEP's implementation, we explore the critical context and establishment of trust and community responsiveness as essential drivers to create a strong and dynamic learning environment.
- **Section Two – Strengthened Leaders, Strengthened Organizations:** We continue by examining if professional development delivered within the BNCEP community is responsive to members' needs and of high quality, by exploring the results on individuals and organizations.
- **Section Three – Implications for Scaling and Evolution:** We conclude with reflections on how CLE's approach may be distinct, impactful, and adaptable beyond its current context.

CLE's programs are non-transactional, high touch, high trust, and high accountability. Professional development is both community-driven and culturally resonant. The result is a leadership community that not only supports individual executives but also advances broader collective goals. By investing in leadership through this model, CLE is building the foundation for a stronger, more equitable nonprofit sector – and creating a model for potential replication in the future.

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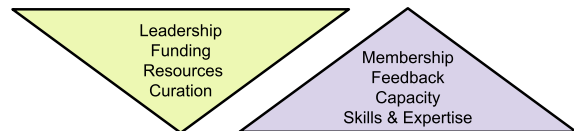


Introduction

The **Center for Leadership Equity** (CLE) was designed and framed by Kelly Woodland and incubated in the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ). The Center was established in partnership with the Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia (BNCEP) to provide a home for its continued work and expand on its vision and mission.

The **Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia** was launched in June 2020 by Renee Hughes, Keisha Jordan, and Kelly Woodland to support Black nonprofit leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 social justice reckoning. Anchored in findings from multiple reports, including “How African American-Led Organizations differ from White-Led Organizations” and “Reflecting Forward: Philadelphia-based Black Nonprofit Leaders’ Recommendations for Regional Funders,” the group was founded to address the persistent inequities faced by Black nonprofit leaders and Black-led, Black-serving organizations in the region. CLE provides an infrastructure for leadership development, equitable funding, and advocacy, with a commitment to ensuring that those most proximate to community needs have the resources, support, and networks to thrive.

The **Center for Leadership Equity** seeks to boldly reimagine what meaningful capacity building looks like for nonprofit leaders. As a strategic bridge between philanthropy and the nonprofit sector, CLE strengthens leadership, fosters cross-sector collaboration, and drives the long-term change our communities need. A core role of CLE is to convene the Black Nonprofit Executives of Philadelphia.



The **Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia** is a collective of nonprofit leaders in Philadelphia, dedicated to enriching leadership, enhancing resources, and amplifying the ability to support residents and organizations to thrive, thereby contributing to a flourishing city and region. At the heart of BNCEP’s mission is a simple yet profound principle: Supporting organizations led by Black executives benefits everyone. The focus of BNCEP is on developing skills, enhancing leadership, and nurturing community and culture.

The current BNCEP community has expanded to more than 350 members representing nonprofit organizations across the city, under the continued leadership of Kelly Woodland and Principal Folasshade Dunbar. BNCEP was founded in a time that highlighted long-standing systemic inequities, and has emerged as a long-term community-rooted response: an intentional gathering space for Black executive leaders to connect, grow as leaders and individuals, and address structural barriers.

The Role of the Center

The Center for Leadership Equity provides critical infrastructure for BNCEP, and through that work provides leadership support to the nonprofit field as a whole. As shown in the graphic above, CLE provides a “home” for BNCEP, raising funds to support the work, providing staff to lead the collective via Woodland and Dunbar, and through delivering curated high-quality programming. The goal of the Center for Leadership Equity is to provide “infrastructure, programming, and people” to power the work of BNCEP and others. In turn, BNCEP is able to furnish CLE with volunteer leadership, skilled capacity builders, member collaborations, resource sharing, and feedback to improve and direct the programming. This combination promotes responsive capacity building.



CLE staff and infrastructure allows for a responsive vision for leadership development in the nonprofit sector. **CLE is exploring expanding this vision through replicating what it has learned with BNCEP, and bringing programming to other areas of the nonprofit field.** This would extend the network and feedback loop currently in place with BNCEP to other collectives, ideally strengthening all of the work. The core elements of this potential replication are discussed in the conclusion section of this document.

Exploring Early Evidence of Results

As it considers how to expand on what has been done to date, the Center for Leadership Equity commissioned this report to explore early evidence of the effectiveness of the mode of leadership development emphasized by BNCEP. CLE commissioned a set of focus groups, surveys, and a review of historical programmatic data.

The programmatic theory that underlies BNCEP is straightforward. When leaders are supported within a trusted community, they are better equipped to surface individual needs and strengthen their leadership. This support, in turn, allows for stronger nonprofit organizations, which can drive better outcomes for the broader community and the sector as a whole. This approach is grounded in targeted universalism: While Black leaders are supported by BNCEP, the larger opportunity is to support the nonprofit sector as a whole.

This report sets out to explore a set of learning questions in three sections:

- **Section One – A Community Model for Leadership Development:** Through BNCEP's implementation, we explore the critical context and establishment of trust and community responsiveness as essential drivers to create a strong and dynamic learning environment.
- **Section Two – Strengthened Leaders, Strengthened Organizations:** We continue by examining if professional development delivered within the BNCEP community is responsive to members' needs and of high quality, by exploring the results on individuals and organizations.
- **Section Three – Implications for Scaling and Evolution:** We conclude with reflections on how CLE's approach may be distinct, impactful, and adaptable beyond its current context.

Learning questions, program offerings, and a brief description of methods are included as appendices.

The work to support BNCEP is built on intentional infrastructure. We start our exploration by examining how these supports are put in place.



SECTION ONE:

A Community Model for Leadership Development

The Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia is supported and curated by the Center for Leadership Equity in delivering multiple programs including: learning academies; executive roundtables; coaching and mentorship; quarterly strategy sessions; and community wellness experiences. More detail on these programs is included in the appendix.

While the membership of BNCEP cited value in each of these programs, it is the context and curation that are the hallmarks of BNCEP. **Behind each retreat, roundtable, and leadership academy is careful curation, convening, and responsive design that ensures alignment with member-identified needs and the broader vision of equity.** The infrastructure for BNCEP seeks to ensure leadership development is not a transactional service but thrives as a dynamic, enduring community of practice.

Starting with Trust

The Center for Leadership Equity grounds its capacity-building approach in trust, a core insight cultivated through years of convening and learning in step with BNCEP’s leaders and growth. During focus groups, participants repeatedly described it as a “safety net for Black leaders” in a political and social environment that often offers complexities for their leadership. This anchor of trust is not accidental; it is carefully cultivated through shared identity, accountability practices, and expectations. Because nonprofit leaders know they can show up authentically and without judgment, they are able to share vulnerabilities, challenges, and collectively strategize around systemic issues in ways that would not be possible in all spaces. Members describe BNCEP as feeling like “family” – a place where one can be greeted with hugs and affirmation, regardless of organizational size or status – yet it is also a space where expectations are clear and boundaries are respected. This balance has been actively cultivated by BNCEP leadership and the support of CLE.

“BNCEP created a space where leaders could show up authentically. We shared our stories, our challenges, and our hopes for the future. This vulnerability built a deep sense of trust – one that allowed for honest dialogue, courageous leadership, and meaningful connection.”

Program leadership and members cite multiple ways that trust is built. These include belonging anchored in shared identity, accountability to expectations, and role modeling from BNCEP leadership.

BELONGING ANCHORED IN SHARED IDENTITY

Belonging in BNCEP is deeply tied to the identity and lived experiences of its members. Leaders emphasized that being among executive peers who understand the pressures of leadership, and also share Black identity, creates the space to “just be.” Members cited common structural



barriers that are faced by Black nonprofit leaders.¹⁻² However, they indicated that their experience of the group was not due only to shared racial identity. One member reflected, “I don’t want it to feel like it’s as simple as because we’re all Black . . . I don’t feel that comfort in [all] rooms, but I do feel that comfort with BNCEP . . . [it is] trust and familial.” This may be due to the intentional approach to adding members. Survey and focus group respondents shared that peer referral and invitation was the single most common entry point into BNCEP. This invitation reinforced a sense of belonging, and responsibility to support the group.

“Every encounter has been better than the last. As a young professional, these meetings, resources, and connections have been influential in molding my future.”

ACCOUNTABILITY TO EXPECTATIONS

Members consistently highlighted how expectations and boundaries are essential cornerstones of what makes this model work. As one participant put it, “Kelly, [the executive director], makes it clear this isn’t a place to secretly enrich yourself. We’re here to strengthen leaders. He holds us accountable, and that accountability builds trust.” Accountability is enforced through clear norms of professionalism and integrity that safeguard the collective. One oft-repeated tenet is that this space is not “transactional” – instead, it is a channel for “mutual support.” Members are expected to ask for what they need, and offer support when they can. One practical example was captured by a member describing something as simple as committing to a meeting: “If you say you can do it, you can do it. If you can’t do it, don’t do it. Don’t play games; don’t mess around.”

This does not mean that members are all expected to participate in the same way, or at the same level of involvement. Participation in BNCEP is responsive and flexible, meeting leaders where they are on their own journeys. In BNCEP, leaders of \$5,000 organizations sit alongside leaders of \$20 million organizations as equals, bound by shared identity and common challenges. Instead of a one-size-fits-all curriculum, members choose among multiple paths of engagement, depending on their timing, needs, and capacity. This flexibility allows both new executives battling a steep learning curve and seasoned CEOs navigating funding crises to find meaningful support within the community.

ROLE MODELING

Central to sustaining this culture is the relational modeling of BNCEP’s leadership team: Kelly Woodland and Folasshade Dunbar. As told by members, they together embody the balance of accountability and warmth that define the community. They both express an insistence on professionalism, responsibility, and accountability. At the same time, they both embody a spirit of hospitality that offers a warm welcome and guidance. Woodland and Dunbar often partner in hosting, and members described the modeling shown by this leadership dyad as essential.

¹ Thomas-Breitfeld, S., and Kunreuther, F. "Trading Glass Ceilings for Glass Cliffs: A Race to Lead Report on Nonprofit Executives of Color." (2011).

² Brathwaite, L. The more you know: Key facts about Black nonprofit leadership. Candid Insights. (2024).



What emerges is more than a professional development network. BNCEP has become a self-described family – one that does not conflate community with laxity. It is high touch, high trust, high accountability, and hyper-focused on enhancing leaders and organizations. It is a community where leaders are affirmed in their identities and held to their commitments.

“The networking, educational, and professional development activities are well curated and timely ... The quality of the presenters allows BNCEP to stand out as well.”

As described in the introduction, having consistent, active leadership is one of the ways that the Center for Leadership Equity is able to deliver this role modeling and trust-building approach, and program leadership cite this infrastructure as critical to being able to create and sustain this culture.

Responsive Program Design

In this space, trust is an important foundation, but responsiveness and curation are the intended drivers of learning. The investment in community creates an environment where members can share learning needs. One member explained, “I am able to be myself and share my professional development needs in a trusting and confidential environment.” The sharing of learning needs is gathered by CLE leadership through formal surveys and informal conversations. These themes are then converted into planning for the programs, which include: learning academies, executive roundtables, quarterly strategy sessions, and community wellness experiences. Specific needs can be met in smaller groups or one-on-one through their Leadership Edge Initiative, which provides coaching with professional providers and mentorship to assigned peers. Insights from CLE data collection activities indicate that the programs provided to members are high quality with exit-ticket data indicating high satisfaction, engagement, and retention.³ Where pre-post data existed, it indicated that members increase their knowledge, confidence, and enhance leadership skills after participating in programs.⁴

A SHORTER PATH TO SOLUTIONS

BNCEP leadership describe the reduction of time and effort in meeting the needs of the membership as providing a “shorter path” to solutions. Members are encouraged to share what they are struggling with so these challenges can be met with shared support or individualized engagements and introductions. Not only is this a quicker feedback loop to support needs, it is also not experienced as didactic, with one member sharing that “the learning is not top-down – it’s collaborative, relational, and deeply personal.”

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF SUPPORT

The activities of CLE leadership in support of BNCEP provide the necessary infrastructure to ensure the community can thrive. The efforts of program leadership were all cited as the drivers

³ Woodland, K., Dunbar, F. Groundwork for Growth: Two Years of Strategy, Connection, and Momentum. United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey - The Center for Leadership Equity. (2025).

⁴ The Center for Leadership Equity. Program pre-post survey data. (2024-2025). [internal data collection]



of quality, including hosting the community, engaging in feedback loops to deliver on needs, and curating programming. All of these efforts require resources.

Taken together, with the scaffolding of trust, and well curated delivery, members report that the “professional development experiences at BNCEP are rooted in what the community needs.”

Grounding in Existing Evidence

BNCEP works to cultivate a space for continuous learning and a growth mindset. We believe this is closely connected to psychological safety or “the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”⁵ Research shows the benefits of psychological safety for both individuals and organizations. Multiple studies have shown this as a factor in successful teams,⁶ leading to increased organizational performance, innovation, positive culture, and organization adaptability.⁷ Surveys suggest that psychological safety is rare in organizations and groups.⁷

CLE’s design inherently incorporates many of the elements of effectively establishing psychological safety in their programs including, but not limited to, building trust and community, role modeling and open dialogue, transparency in expectations and accountability, culturally responsive mentorship programs, and open-feedback channels.⁸⁻⁹ These practices allow for greater learning, trust, collaboration, relationship building, teamwork, and knowledge sharing within the BNCEP program.

Further, well-designed and effective professional and leadership development activities have numerous benefits for individuals as well as organizations. Research indicates that individuals gain skills, advancement opportunities, and confidence while organizations can experience enhanced productivity, talent retention, higher staff motivation, and higher job satisfaction.¹⁰

From Belonging to Results

Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia was started in direct response to long-standing inequities facing Black nonprofit leaders and Black-led organizations in the region, and it builds on earlier research and organizing. BNCEP is focused on supporting leaders in their journey, honing their leadership skills, and bolstering their organizations. In the next section, we explore evidence from focus groups and surveys of the BNCEP membership – working to lay out the story of the results of participation in the words of members.

⁵ Edmondson, Amy. "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams." *Administrative science quarterly* 44.2 (1999): 350-383.

⁶ Google. Project Aristotle (2015); [Internal report findings]

⁷ De Smet, Aaron, et al. "Psychological safety and the critical role of leadership development." *McKinsey and Company*. (2021).

⁸ McKinsey Explainers. "What is psychological safety?" *McKinsey and Company*. (2023)

⁹ Bowen, C. Turner, M. Handout – Strategies for fostering PS with CRPs. University of Wisconsin-Madison. (2024). [Webinar]

¹⁰ Geerts, Jaason M. "Maximizing the impact and ROI of leadership development: A theory-and evidence-informed framework." *Behavioral Sciences* 14.10 (2024): 955.



SECTION TWO:

Strengthened Leaders, Strengthened Organizations

The Center for Leadership Equity was founded to create stronger leaders, stronger organizations, and, ultimately, a stronger nonprofit community that generates better outcomes for the participants served by the sector.

This section of the report highlights evidence of the tangible benefits that BNCEP has shown at both the level of **individual leadership** and **organizational strength**. Across the focus groups, participants consistently described concrete outcomes they experienced. While these themes are drawn from a sample of leaders that volunteered to participate in focus groups and surveys, they are a strong indication of the outcomes that are generated by BNCEP.

Strengthened Leaders

Through focus groups, all leaders interviewed identified areas where participation in BNCEP strengthened their leadership. Similarly, the vast majority of survey respondents (90%, n=30), agreed that participating in BNCEP activities strengthened their leadership. Seven common areas are described below.

INCREASED CONFIDENCE

“Being in this space reminded me that I do belong at the table. I’m not second-guessing myself ... when I walk into funder meetings.”

Many leaders described BNCEP as a space where their sense of expertise and self-worth was affirmed. This community provided the validation needed to stand tall in high-stakes settings. This confidence was described as both individual growth as well as developing collective power based on a community that explicitly names and identifies one another’s expertise.

REDUCED ISOLATION

“It’s the first time I’ve felt like I’m not leading alone. Having other Black leaders around who ‘get it’ has made me feel stronger in my role.”

Leading a nonprofit, especially in times of acute need, can be profoundly lonely. The role of BNCEP in combating this isolation emerged repeatedly across focus groups and surveys. Members spoke about the difference it made to know they were no longer navigating challenges in isolation. The simple act of being in a physical or digital space with peers who understand shared realities leadership was both restorative and sustaining for members.



ACCESS TO TOOLS

“I’ve taken strategies from the coaching and directly applied them with my staff. It gave me frameworks I didn’t have before.”

BNCEP has served as a vital source of concrete, practice-oriented leadership development. Workshops, academies, and coaching gave leaders tools and skills they could immediately apply in their organizations. For example, coaching services provided leaders with the tools and skills to advance board development and governance, strategic planning and execution, and provided structured approaches to organizational challenges. Further, data from the 2025 coaching program, Leadership Edge, reported universal satisfaction rates in the services provided to members. The community of BNCEP was both technically useful and delivered in a context that members described as one of trust, which reduced vulnerability or defensiveness while learning.

EXPANDED NETWORKS

“Through BNCEP I met peers I now partner with — we’ve shared board members, shared referrals, and even collaborated on a grant together.”

Participation in BNCEP expanded leaders’ networks in ways that translated into tangible organizational benefits, which will be described in greater detail below. Members spoke of recruiting board members, securing partnerships, and co-writing grants as a result of relationships forged in the community. These partnerships created opportunities that were not transactional, but emerged organically as a result of leaders with similar needs being in frequent fellowship.

RECIPROCAL MENTORSHIP AND MODELING

“One of my mentors used to say, ‘Adults learn when they have to, right?’ And so it’s like, there’s examples of [being] able to get really high-quality support from folks that are just either a little further down the road or actual professionals in that space that have ‘built the building.’”

BNCEP was not only a space where leaders came to learn, but also a place where they discovered their role as mentors and models for one another. Seasoned executives spoke of sharing strategies and lessons with newer leaders, while newer members valued the chance to learn from peers who had walked the path before them. The community emphasizes that leadership is strengthened when knowledge and experience are shared.

LEADERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY

“The retreat was life-giving. I didn’t realize how depleted I was until I had that chance to step back and restore. It made me a better leader when I came back.”

BNCEP’s approach emphasizes wellness and sustainability. Many leaders reflected that they had not realized the importance of intentional spaces for rest and renewal. The annual retreat, in



particular, was described as a turning point. This intentional prioritization of wellness prevents burnout and sustains leadership in the sector.

LEADERSHIP RESILIENCE

“Every time I come into spaces like this, with these beautiful people, I just get that much more inspired. It certainly charges and is a catalyst for just collaboration, thought partnership, and cross-pollination.”

Finally, leaders described BNCEP as a vital source of encouragement during difficult times, helping them sustain resilience when the pressures of nonprofit leadership felt overwhelming. Members noted that the motivation they drew from the group kept them returning, even in seasons of exhaustion. As one put it simply, “The motivation and the encouragement – that’s what keeps me coming back.” These moments of sustenance illustrate that the strength of BNCEP lies not only in the formal programming but in the enduring sense of renewal leaders receive from being in community.

Strengthened Organizations

The larger goal of stronger leaders is stronger organizations and a stronger nonprofit ecosystem as a result. In the focus groups, we surfaced evidence of tangible benefits to organizations as a result of membership in BNCEP. Likewise, the survey identified that 84% (n=30) of BNCEP members agree that the program has strengthened their organizations. Six areas are described below.

INCREASED RESOURCES

“Because of the introductions through BNCEP, we were able to get a grant that wouldn’t have been on our radar otherwise.”

Leaders pointed to concrete organizational benefits, particularly around access to funding and other resources. BNCEP’s intentional convenings and peer referrals opened doors to grants, funders, and resource streams that leaders reported they would not have otherwise been aware of. Others noted being able to benefit from advice that reduced certain expenses – in one case by 90% – by adopting a different organizational structure. These resource flows strengthen organizations financially but also signal increased credibility with funders and partners, expanding the possibilities for long-term sustainability.

PROGRAMMATIC COLLABORATIONS

“We started collaborating with another member’s organization after connecting at a BNCEP meeting. Now we’re jointly running a program we could never have done alone.”

The relational foundation of BNCEP has also translated into new partnerships that broaden organizational capacity. Leaders described meeting at convenings, discovering shared priorities, and developing joint programs that neither could have executed alone. These collaborations



represent the tangible impact of collective capacity, enabling organizations to stretch resources, increase reach, and deliver programming at a scale beyond what they could achieve individually.

BOARD AND STAFFING

“I was able to find a new board member through someone I met in the network. That was a huge boost for our organization.”

Leaders emphasized the critical role BNCEP played in strengthening their governance and staffing capacity. Recruitment of skilled board members and trusted staff can be a major barrier for nonprofits, especially those led by and serving Black communities. The network provided a trusted pool of potential candidates and referrals that leaders could draw from to shore up organizational leadership. As one member put it, in this way, BNCEP not only expands social capital for individual leaders but also directly enhances the infrastructure of their organizations.

ADVOCACY

“When the city council was looking to have nonprofits go through the same process as for-profits to get contracts, the advocacy committee was right on top of that. And as a new leader, I felt very encouraged because my organization would have been affected.”

BNCEP also strengthened organizations by creating a platform for collective voice. Leaders described having a platform to discuss contracting processes, payment timelines, and nonprofit sector needs with policymakers. These examples show how BNCEP not only supports individual organizations but also builds the sector’s collective capacity to shape the environment in which they operate.

CRISIS NAVIGATION

“When we started losing funding ... we were able to get a contract with [another member]. Doing that kept us afloat for that one year. It really did. I would have never even known ... had we not been meeting here.”

Multiple leaders emphasized that BNCEP connections made the difference between survival and closure during moments of crisis. Others described how introductions within the network opened doors to contracts or collaborations at critical junctures, preventing layoffs and service disruption. In these ways, BNCEP functioned as a stabilizing safety net, offering organizations tangible solutions in moments of existential threats.

LEADERSHIP STABILITY AND RETENTION

“Honestly, I might have left if I didn’t have this space. BNCEP gave me the support to keep going when I was burned out.”

Finally, leaders noted that a vital role BNCEP plays is that of helping leaders stay at the helm of their organizations during moments of fatigue. Nonprofit leadership can be an isolating and



overwhelming role, and without meaningful support, turnover is a persistent risk. Several participants reflected that the sense of community and affirmation provided through BNCEP gave them the resilience to continue in roles they had considered leaving. In this way, the network acts as a retention mechanism, helping organizations avoid the destabilizing effects of leadership churn by sustaining the people at their core. One leader candidly shared, “if I had found BNCEP earlier, I may not have resigned from my last role.”

Why These Results Matter

BNCEP provides leaders with skills, knowledge, and support through a broad community. Members return for the programming because they see results for themselves and other leaders. Our findings above suggest that CLE is meeting its goal of strengthening leaders.

This programming allows members to grow as leaders and navigate challenges on a day-to-day basis by reducing isolation, promoting vulnerability and authentic displays of self, and through increasing the confidence of these leaders to sustain their work and remain in their roles. This is especially important given the barriers that were surfaced in the foundational reports cited above. Additionally, Black nonprofit leaders, especially Black women, report “overwhelming exhaustion, chronic stress, and burnout” with limited support, unrealistic expectations, inability to be their authentic selves and to display vulnerability, in addition to the many structural barriers that Black nonprofits and their leaders face.¹¹⁻¹² These dynamics have in part resulted in a decline in Black nonprofit staff who report leadership aspirations, which limits the pipeline of future leaders. As shown in the outcomes above, many of CLE’s activities connect with strategies to build greater supportive infrastructure for Black leaders who too often do not find adequate leadership enhancement programming.¹²

Our findings extended beyond stronger leaders, with members citing BNCEP as a critical part of the ecosystem that created stronger organizations. Stronger organizations are better positioned to attract funding, retain staff, develop leadership pipelines, collaborate, navigate uncertainty, and deliver on their missions. Focus group participants shared how BNCEP connections helped them secure new board members, access critical funding, and form strategic partnerships that kept their organizations afloat during moments of financial crisis. These are not abstract outcomes, they are important factors that stabilize and elevate nonprofits while ensuring that the needs of the community are met effectively. Furthermore, these findings suggest a path to addressing the funding and visibility of inequities that were highlighted in the foundational reports. While more evidence is needed to understand if the Center for Leadership Equity is closing the gaps that were highlighted in those reports, this early evidence of the effectiveness of the programming is encouraging as CLE seeks to replicate its work.

¹¹ Washington Area Women’s Foundation. Thrive As They Lead: Advancing the Infrastructure to Support Black Women Leaders in the D.C. Metro Area Nonprofit Sector. (2023).

¹² Suarez, C. The State of Black Women Leadership Is In Danger. Nonprofit Quarterly. (2023).



SECTION THREE :

Implications for Scaling and Evolution

This evidence exploration has identified considerations for the Center for Leadership Equity in its continued work. These include areas of focus when deepening the existing work with the Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia, and core elements to emphasize when launching programs and initiatives beyond BNCEP.

Deepening Existing Work: Areas of Focus for BNCEP

Much of the data from existing sources and collected from focus groups and surveys pointed to a robust program that meets the needs of its membership. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with one member summing up their experience across many professional development opportunities: “I have not really received anything close to [BNCEP’s] value.” This said, there are a few areas that CLE may want to focus on to support the community:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY

CLE leadership and BNCEP members both cited the interest in advancing nascent collective advocacy efforts. Early efforts have created a platform for contracting processes, payment timelines, and nonprofit sector needs with policymakers. However, there are challenges due to the diversity of nonprofit organizations and social service domains represented in the membership. Members explicitly see advocacy as an untapped or emerging frontier: “There’s plenty of opportunity ... we haven’t come together to advocate for Black nonprofit leaders, and I see an opportunity to do that.” Program leadership is planning for continued efforts to position the community as an easy way for policymakers to connect with a coalition of nonprofit leaders.

There are additional opportunities for collective advocacy that can respond to the interest of specific members. This is emerging from organized groups such as the Advocacy Committee, and will benefit from intentional co-development. Survey results indicated that members’ top three most urgent priorities for collective advocacy are nonprofit sector representation in policy decisions (67%); equitable funding practices (56%); and leadership development investment (50%) – with the ultimate goal of this advocacy being more BNCEP leaders visibly influencing public conversations (75%); equitable grantmaking practices (56%); member organizations gaining influence or visibility (53%); and policy change or public commitments (50%).

In alignment with the needs cited in *Reflecting Forward*, members noted the need to continuously surface “collective successes,” with the goal of increasing visibility for leaders and organizations and attracting revenue.

CONTINUE GROUNDING IN THE APPROACH

Members cited the need to “stay the course” on core program values. This includes guarding against dilution of the identity of the group, or drifting from the focus on trust and accountability. Members also applauded the continuous surfacing of needs from the membership. The only adaptation needs we heard on the current process of surfacing and delivering programming was a) to consider offering tracked programming for different levels of



skill, and b) not to drop the more “mundane” professional development opportunities (one member noted “a new leader needs to know about liability.”)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE BUILDING

This exploration was not designed to surface evidence of all of the intended outcomes of BNCEP. There is an opportunity to continue to understand more deeply if BNCEP is meeting the needs of the membership and strengthening leaders and organizations. **Future explorations can also investigate if the work with this community is connected to a stronger nonprofit ecosystem, better resident outcomes, and a more equitable funding landscape.**

Launching New Programs: Core Components

CLE’s capacity was built by meeting the unique needs of historically under-resourced leaders. The leadership is exploring models for how to leverage this experience to offer responsive capacity building to strengthen others in the nonprofit ecosystem. As the leadership makes these plans, we surface four core components that emerged as critical, and offer some reflections for replication.

CORE COMPONENTS

Drawing from the successful elements of CLE convening, supporting, and partnering with the BNCEP community, we offer the observations below about the context for and implementation of the program.

- **A community with common structural barriers:** A shared community that experiences barriers in similar ways. This can be based on identity, field, or both. In the context of BNCEP, this was the experience of being a Black nonprofit leader. Note that this is not a deficit framework, as the approach recognizes and leverages the expertise of the membership to build social capital and remove barriers. It is simply a reflection of prioritizing the focus of targeted universalism approach that CLE employs.
- **Trusted leadership that identifies as a representative of this community:** Leaders of the community are identified that have shared experiences with the members. This trust is emphasized by ensuring the community is relational, not transactional.
- **Infrastructure for curation:** Investment in structuring the community, seeking input on needs, and delivering support and programming in a responsive way. This requires investment in and focus on solutions for the membership. CLE provides expertise in convening, field knowledge, and community relationships which are drivers of active and responsive curation.
- **Community accountability supporting belonging:** Leaders that are empowered to hold members accountable to explicit and implicit commitments, supporting a space that engenders trust. CLE’s leadership dyad with differing, complimentary styles and expertise was instrumental.

While CLE is exploring opportunities for expansion, we encourage using the above components to test if it will fit with the needs and context of leaders. There is a great opportunity for CLE to leverage the learning from BNCEP to create additional offerings. Given the core components



above, this may be able to range from replicating BNCEP in another city to launching a wholly new community targeting a different set of structural barriers for nonprofit leaders. The track record that CLE has developed in partnership with BNCEP creates an opportunity for the leadership to explore applying this expertise to replication of technical assistance for developing a new community of leaders.

Final Reflections

It was a great privilege for the authors of this paper to partner with the leaders from the Center for Leadership Equity and the Black Nonprofit Chief Executives of Philadelphia. We are indebted to the membership for sharing their stories, observations, and feedback. From these conversations, we learned much about the importance and value of this work to leaders, organizations, and the Philadelphia nonprofit ecosystem.



APPENDIX A: Learning Questions

To guide this report, Project Evident, in partnership with CLE, developed a prioritized set of learning questions that we aimed to address through this report, to guide focus groups, and drive broader data collection activities:

- How are the trust and community critical to the end outcomes of the CLE? How are trust and community built for CLE with evidence from the implementation of BNCEP?
- Are the PD supports more responsive, efficient, and effective if delivered in the context of such a community? Do these PD supports avoid issues with other models (mismatch with needs, reinforcement of deficit narrative, issues with providing across a range of levels of organizational maturity, etc.)? Are the PD supports of high quality?
- Is there evidence that leaders are strengthened through this work? Is there evidence that organizations are strengthened through this work?
- Has this community been able to successfully collectively advocate, making changes in the ecosystem (i.e., funding, casemaking, etc.) Are there examples of where this is happening, or ready opportunities?
- What other evidence is available that this way of organizing leadership supports is preferable to a standard or cohort model?
- What is different about the CLE approach, how is it impactful, and how can it be adapted and be provided to the sector in different contexts?



APPENDIX B: Methods

Project Evident relied on a multi-faceted approach to understand the operating context and the experiences of BNCEP members to effectively guide this report. The following were primary inputs into this report:

- **Focus Groups:** Project Evident held both live and in-person focus groups with BNCEP members in June and July 2025. Using a structured focus group protocol tied to the learning agenda, Project Evident was able to engage more than 25 active members, through seven focus groups, to gain greater insight into the value of BNCEP for individuals and their organizations.
- **BNCEP Member Survey:** In partnership with CLE, Project Evident designed and deployed a BNCEP member survey to capture data from BNCEP members who were not able to join focus groups. This survey was aligned with the focus group protocol and focused on the quality of services provided through the program. Input from the more than 30 responses were included within the report.
- **CLE / BNCEP Data Collection:** Project Evident reviewed current and historical data collected through the BNCEP program to assess programmatic activities and member satisfaction.
- **CLE / BNCEP Historical Context & Impact:** Project Evident reviewed guiding documentation that was developed during initial design and implementation stages of the BNCEP program. Additionally, Project Evident reviewed the recently published 2-year CLE report.



APPENDIX C: CLE Programming

CLE offers a number of tailored leadership enhancement/professional development opportunities to members:

- **CLE Learning Academies** deliver high-impact, executive-level workshops designed to strengthen nonprofit leaders' core capacities – from fiscal management and strategic planning to AI integration, governance, and equity-centered leadership. Shaped by the priorities of the BNCEP, these sessions provide practical tools to lead with clarity, sustainability, and purpose.
- **Leadership Edge Initiative** provides responsive, relationship-centered leadership development through one-on-one executive coaching, real-time support, and peer mentorship circles. Designed to help nonprofit leaders navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and grow within a supportive community, this initiative creates a trusted space for the personal guidance leaders need to lead with confidence and resilience.
- **CEO Roundtables** bring real-time perspectives to urgent policy and organizational challenges, offering nonprofit executives a trusted space to exchange insights, tackle shared issues, and co-create solutions. These convenings address topics ranging from board engagement and crisis communication to unpacking policy/executive orders and fiscal sponsorship, mergers and acquisitions – advancing innovation and strategic leadership across the sector.
- **Get to Know Us** events are CLE's signature gatherings that connect public, private, and philanthropic partners with member organizations. More than networking, these curated forums build trust, foster dialogue, and spark collaboration – often leading to new partnerships, funding opportunities, and cross-sector initiatives that advance shared goals.
- **CLE Wellness Initiatives** promote restoration, vitality, and collective care through experiences that center the holistic well-being of Black nonprofit leaders. Rooted in cultural connection and healing—these offerings create intentional spaces for reflection, storytelling, movement, and solidarity. Together, they address the stress, burnout, and structural inequities that impact leadership and sustainability.





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