

2016 CPE Community Assessment

After 18 years, the Center for Political Education recently took a moment to assess its role as a political education organization in service of movement building in the Bay Area, and to imagine what its next steps forward should be. During this period of assessment, a group of advisors made up of former CPE staffers, collective members, and from the Board of Directors of the Kendra Alexander Foundation (KAF), CPE's fiscal sponsor, came together to help facilitate the Center moving toward the next phase of its development

The CPE advisory group brought Isaac Ontiveros on as a short-term consultant to conduct an assessment based on feedback from the Center's former staffers, members, funders and allies. Isaac worked with the advisory group to set up interviews and conversations with former CPE collective members and staff persons, along with CPE allies and partners from over the last 18 years. He then distilled their reflections and analysis into an understanding of the main strengths, weaknesses, and impacts of the Center's work, and helped the advisory group to develop recommendations for the CPE's work moving forward.

Reflecting on the internal and external dynamics of CPE, the assessment found that while many felt that the Center's work has become less impactful in the past several years due to issues including staff and volunteer collective capacity, political focus, and continuity of programming, overwhelmingly CPE has been viewed as a valuable, independent, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, internationalist educational space. This space has been valuable as a vehicle through which various organizations and community members have been able to develop their understanding of current local, regional, national, and international current events, while also engaging in deeper political analysis and study of political theory that supports radical movement building. The vast majority of assessment participants also agreed that, more than ever, an independent and radical political education space that draws together organizations and community members to broaden their understanding, deepen their analysis, and sharpen their work would be an extremely valuable and impactful contribution to left movements in the Bay Area today.

Responding to general enthusiasm for the Center to reignite its work, the CPE advisory group recommended that the Kendra Alexander Foundation fund an intensive two-year rebuild process for the Center. The rebuild would be driven by two full-time staff people who would focus on developing and implementing robust political education programming in tandem with reestablishing collaborative relationships with current, former, and potential allies. The staff will develop fundraising infrastructure that will help the Center become more financially self-sufficient, while also refreshing and extending CPE's communications and outreach tools and strategies, and widen and deepen the scope and impact of its work.

The rebuild will also include work to clarify CPE's internal protocols and procedures, with an emphasis on institutionalizing rigorous self-evaluation of programming and political direction. The CPE staff would also work to build an active community advisory group that would support the Center to accomplish all of the above. The assessment recommendations further proposed that the CPE collective be suspended indefinitely and until the staff and advisors are able to determine whether a volunteer collective structure is the best structure to carry out the Center's work. Rather than work quickly to reestablish a volunteer collective, the staff would prioritize strengthening the foundation, infrastructure, and programming work of the Center.

This past August, KAF approved and began to implement the CPE assessment advisory group's recommendations. We are excited to announce that we have asked Isaac Ontiveros, who coordinated the Center's assessment process, and Rachel Herzing, who was on the assessment advisory group and is

a former CPE collective member, to lead the next phase of CPE's work as its staff. We are pleased that they have agreed and look forward to Rachel and Isaac sharing a fuller introduction in early November.

The CPE rebuild is imagined not only as a means of reestablishing the Center's ability to respond to the political education needs and requests of the Bay Area's movement organizations. It also acts as a vital institution that draws on a unique, politically independent view to help shape movements' understanding of the local, national, and international context in which they develop and do their work. What follows is a more detailed description of the assessment, its findings, and CPE's plans moving forward.

The Assessment Process and its Participants

The Center for Political Education assessment included input from 31 individuals who were either former CPE collective members, former CPE staff people, KAF Board members, or representatives of movement organizations—some represented a combination of all of the above. Former collective members, staffers, and allies who participated in the assessment process came from a fairly broad swath of the CPE's history (from the foundation of the center in the late 1990s to its most recent iteration). Most of the former CPE members interviewed have stayed in movement work of some type since leaving the Center—working and volunteering for progressive non-profits and service providers, labor, education, and other grassroots organizations. Movement participants in the assessment included people doing work in base-building organizations, labor organizing, anti-racist organizing, anti-prison industrial complex and prisoner support organizations, legal services, Arab and Muslim organizing, progressive service providers, Filipino national democratic movement building, movement training schools, and educational institutions. Most participants in the CPE assessment were people of color, women, and are engaged politically.

The assessment process was comprised of roughly two parts—an internal assessment from former CPE collective volunteers and staff members, along with KAF board members, and an external assessment from CPE allies, collaborators, and supporters. Again, some participants represented a mixture of the above. Input and analysis was gained through one-on-one conversations, email exchanges, a large-group feedback session, and an electronic survey. The input was synthesized into reports shared with the CPE advisory group, who then decided on next steps.

Phase 1: Former CPE Collective Members and Staff People, and KAF Board Members Discuss CPE's Past, Present, and Future

The initial assessment came from former CPE collective members and staffers, along with Kendra Alexander Foundation board members regarding their thoughts on the past, present and future of the Center for Political Education. Those interviewed represented a range of experience that spread across the history of CPE, and provided thoughtful assessment, thoughts, questions, and ideas.

All interviewees were asked the same question which generally broke down into three sections:

1. The goals, vision, work, and impact of CPE
2. The structure of the CPE collective
3. CPE, KAF, and the 522/518 Valencia building and event space

All interviewees were also asked if they had any proposals for CPE as it moved forward, and were encouraged to offer any additional information.

Findings

While there were some differences in how participants described certain aspects of CPE's work, and some differences of opinion regarding problems and solutions, the overall assessment of those interviewed was strikingly consistent.

Regarding the goals and impacts of the center, interviewees generally agreed that:

- CPE has been a valuable, independent, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, internationalist educational space through which various organizations and community members have been able to develop their understanding of current local, regional, national, and international current events, while also engaging in deeper political analysis and study of political theory that supports radical movement building in the Bay Area.
- At its best, CPE has used its connections to different organizations and movements to bring them together and strengthen their individual and connected work.
- CPE has been best integrated into movement work by doing its job well as political education space *for* movements, and taking on key movement questions in its programming.
- CPE has provided a space for inter-organizational dialogue and more in-depth political education programming.
- Over time, CPE has done a good job incorporating cultural work into the events and programming.
- More than ever an *independent and radical* political education space that draws together organizations and community members to broaden their understanding, deepen their analysis, and sharpen their work would be an extremely valuable and impactful contribution to left movement building in the Bay Area.

While a few interviewees critically questioned whether the leadership of the CPE's work necessarily needed to take the form of a volunteer collective, most interviewees found the collective structure to be advantageous to the center's vision and goals. In building, maintaining, and regenerating the CPE collective, interviewees generally agreed that:

- At its best, the collective structure has brought together diverse groups of people who have been able to learn from and challenge one another in pushing forward creative and impactful programming using processes that reflect the political vision CPE and its allies are working towards.
- CPE has been a powerful space for the political development of its collective members through the planning of events and programming, along with some intentional collective study at different times.

Interviewees commented that CPE's work has been challenged by a lack of resources; capacity issues for its staff and volunteer collective members; poor outreach; unevenness in political and skill

development of collective members and staffers; collective member turnover; less-than-rigorous collective member recruitment; poor orientation for new collective members; and poor political fit for some staff and collective members.

Interviewees additionally shared that evaluation of CPE's impact has been a challenge and sometimes uneven and that the roles, responsibilities, and accountability of CPE collective membership has not always been clear. For many assessment participants, in recent CPE history it has been generally unclear who comprised the CPE collective currently (or if one existed), and what its work, goals, and priorities were. When the above-mentioned challenges have been harder to overcome, the depth, arc, and participation in programming of the Center has been negatively affected.

Concerning CPE's staff, interviewees generally agreed that CPE's ability to have a staff has been essential to moving CPE's work and programming forward. CPE staffing has afforded the center the advantage of being in contact and collaboration with key community members, organizations, and movements and past staff members have benefited from the guidance, support, and political development from strong collective members.

However, the role and responsibility of the CPE staff has not always been clear and support, guidance, political development, and work evaluation has been uneven. In relationship to the goals and workload of CPE, the nature of the staff position (one half-time staff) was viewed as unsustainable.

Regarding CPE's relationship to KAF, there was a general understanding that while the foundation has been supportive, consistent communication and evaluation between KAF and CPE has been uneven.

In speaking to the physical infrastructure and local history of the Center, participants agreed that CPE's work has been benefited from the opening of the Eric Quezada Center for Culture and Politics at 518 Valencia St. While all interviewees noted that CPE had an historical and particular relationship to the building, the neighborhood, and San Francisco, only a small minority of interviewees thought that CPE's work was meant to primarily focus *on* the neighborhood, or San Francisco.

Throughout the conversations, interviewees shared thoughts as to how to address challenges faced by CPE. Most agreed that:

- CPE should have/find resources for at least one full-time staffer.
- Rights and responsibilities of collective membership and staffing should be clearer and used as the basis for regular evaluation.
- CPE would benefit from mechanisms that would help it to more clearly understand local, national, and international politics and political trends, with that work engaged as the basis for creating programming that has more of an arc over the course of an agreed-upon time.
- CPE would benefit from regular conversation, interaction, and assessment with an advisory group.
- Regularly convening and engaging with movement stakeholders would help the Center to stay connected to movement work and key movement questions.

- CPE should work to engage community members and organizations outside of its most familiar circles.

Phase 2: Assessment of the Center for Political Education

The second phase of assessment for the Center for Political Education broadened the scope of input to include organizations and individuals with whom the Center has partnered and collaborated in a meaningful way over the past 18 years. Participants in this phase of the assessment were asked to share their experiences of attending CPE programming and collaborating with the Center, what they found impactful and challenging about working with CPE, as well as their ideas about building political education for movement organizations in the future. Participants were also asked if they had any proposals for CPE as it moved forward, and were encouraged to offer any additional information.

Findings

While there were some differences in how participants described certain aspects of CPE's work, and some differences of opinion regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the Center, the overall assessment of those who participated in this phase was fairly consistent. Understanding themselves to be ongoing allies and supporters of CPE's work, participants in this section of the assessment drew from their experiences of the different ways they or their organization collaborated with the Center on individual events or series over nearly two decades. Participants reflected that CPE programming, when at its best, was able to impactfully respond to various political moments and help advance the thinking and work of organizations. While a minority of respondents worked with the assumption the CPE was a San Francisco-centric political project and or conflated the Eric Quezada Center/518 *event space* and CPE as the same thing, most understood the Center to have a broader view and scope to its work.

Overall, the assessments offered by organizations and individuals with whom the Center has partnered and collaborated in a meaningful way over the years mirrored many of the assessments made by former collective members and staff members, most notably:

- CPE has been a valuable, independent, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, internationalist educational space through which various organizations and community members have been able to develop their understanding of current local, regional, national, and international current events, while also engaging in deeper political analysis and study of political theory that supports radical movement building in the Bay Area.
- At its best, CPE has used its connections to different organizations and movements to bring them together and strengthen their individual and connected work.
- More than ever an *independent and radical* political education space that draws together organizations and community members to broaden their understanding, deepen their analysis, and sharpen their work would be an extremely valuable and impactful contribution to left movement building in the Bay Area.

Overwhelmingly, participants had a positive impression CPE and noted:

- The Center's strong anti-imperialist politics
- The Center's crucial non-sectarian position
- The Center's ability to bring together organizations from diverse communities and movements
- The Center's focus on international issues and its work to bring activists, organizers, and thinkers from outside of the US into conversation with local movements
- The Center as a useful space for strategic thinking among movement organizations
- The Center's commitment to accessible yet rigorous educational programming that engaged political theory

Where participants shared critical or negative impressions, the most concerning of these was when several participants shared that they had assumed CPE was no longer an active political project. Others articulated that they were less aware of the Center's programming in the last one to three years. Some participants mentioned it was hard to identify opportunities to encourage their members to attend CPE programming or to have their organizations collaborate with the Center. Poor outreach in the last one to three years, programming that was more “one off”—as opposed to the Center's more dynamic multi-part programming, lack of follow-through on part of staffers and collective members in recent years, and lack of clarity of the goals and priorities of the Center in recent years were also noted challenges. However, most of the respondents expressed enthusiasm about collaborating with the Center in the future.

The structure of CPE seemed to be less known and or less important to many ally participants. The majority of allies were more interested in the constructive work of CPE—its consistency, continuity, and impact—over whether or not the Center is staff-driven or volunteer-led. “Form should follow function” was a phrase used multiple times. When the collective structure was discussed further, a small number of respondents expressed concern that a one person-staffed, volunteer-led structure could inhibit the focus of the Center, given the political task it has set for itself.

Laying out an ideal relationship with the CPE in the future or an overall assessment of movements' political education proved to be challenging and complicated questions, with few easy answers. Again, challenges to articulating a future vision were sometimes exacerbated by allies' lack of awareness of the work of CPE in recent years. However, participants were largely able to imagine collaborating with the Center especially if programming:

- was rigorous (terms like “beyond 101”, “advanced”, “*for organizers*” were used)
- had an “arc” or intentional multi-part nature
- was developed in conversation with organizations' leadership/staff
- included invite-only spaces where tough questions/issues/etc. could be engaged by allied organizations

Bridging the questions of organizations' ideal relationship with CPE and broader questions regarding what kind of political education is most needed in the Bay Area, participants observed:

- While many organization do internal political education, there can be significant limitations to its breadth and depth
- CPE could do unique work in *connecting* organizations, fill in gaps in knowledge and capacity, and be a useful institution to develop overall analysis of larger (*cross-movement, international, theoretical*) concepts
- CPE could be more aggressive in *leading* thinking and analysis among movement organizations

Other overall political education needs that were identified included:

- Strategically mapping the political, social, and economic landscape
- Linking local struggles with international struggles
- Basic-to-advanced study of political economy
- An engagement with upsurge in political activity surrounding the violence of policing
- The development of online resources (toolkits, primers, reading lists, etc.)

Nearly all participants in the ally assessment phase agreed that political education is more important than ever and noted the lack of institutions dedicated solely to political education (with the closing of the Brecht Forum in New York mentioned multiple times). Participants further agreed that the independent, non-sectarian nature of CPE is uniquely beneficial to Bay Area organizations, and that organizations should value and support institutions like CPE.

Allies expressed encouragement toward CPE to rebuild its work to renew a strong role in the constellation of movements and movement work in the Bay Area. Specific recommendations from allies included that along with reinstating strong programming, CPE should take the opportunity to assess the changes in organizing, movements, strategy, and left culture in the Bay Area since the Center was founded. Along these lines respondents also encouraged the Center to develop an understanding of the work of political education institutions that have grown since the founding of CPE. Allies also recommended that continued and focused dialogue with movement organizations to identify and seize on opportunities to collaborate on programming would be beneficial.

Recommendations

Based on the internal and external assessment process, KAF agreed to CPE advisory group's recommendation that KAF make a 2-year commitment to funding two full time staffers who would lead a rebuild plan that would include:

- immediate re-implementation of programming, buttressed by strong organizational outreach, relationship-building, and collaboration, along with increased public presence.
- Strong research, mapping, and analysis of political and social movement landscapes
- Development and renewal of internal structure, accountability and benchmarks, aided by the building of a community advisory group and in service of building a stronger foundation for any future form of the CPE. This step would include the continued suspension of the collective structure.
- Financial self-sufficiency of CPE through more diverse fundraising strategies.

We believe this plan will help chart a strong course for the Center for Political Education's work in the next two years. We hope to work closely with organizations and allies toward investing in our shared futures. We are confident that the CPE next steps forward will be strong ones, helping to build the movement and expand and unite the left through education, analysis, dialogue and action.

For more information about CPE please email center@politicaleducation.org or sign up for our email list here: <http://www.politicaleducation.org/>