

BUILDING THE LOCAL CAPACITY OF THE
NATIONAL WALKING MOVEMENT:

OUTCOMES FROM THE FIRST FOUR YEARS OF THE WALKING COLLEGE





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Outcomes from the First Four Years of the Walking College

Background

In 2015, America Walks launched the Walking College—an online, educational program for walkable community advocates. The primary goal of the Walking College is to build the capacity of local change agents to increase walking and improve walkability, by providing training in best practices and a national network of peers and experts.

Every year, Walking College Fellowships are awarded to about 25 advocates who are working alone, in local organizations, or in their professional capacities to advance walkability. During the 6-month course, Walking College Fellows commit 5-10 hours per week to:

- Study online reading and review materials
- Participate in video-conference discussion forums
- Meet with their Personal Mentors for coaching sessions
- Complete hands-on, community-based assignments
- Attend a relevant national conference and Walking College workshop
- Develop a Walking Action Plan (WAP) for their community

In their WAPs, Fellows establish community goals and an implementation strategy which looks ahead 3-5 years. This report summarizes the successes of the first four classes of Fellows (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018) in terms of progress towards their WAP goals and tangible walkability outcomes in communities across the country.

Methodology

During the winter of 2017/2018, the Fellows who graduated from the Walking College in 2015 and 2016 were asked to complete a survey. A total of 38 out of these 47 Fellows (81%) participated in the survey, which assessed their progress within the first two years after developing their WAPs (for the 2015 Fellows) and within the first year (2016 Fellows).

Two years later (winter of 2019/2020), the same survey was given to all 94 Fellows who had graduated from the four Walking College classes of 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, and the participation rate was 71% (67 Fellows). The combined cohort of Fellows reported in this study are implementing their WAPs in 35 different states, as well as the District of Columbia, Palau, Ontario, and British Columbia (see Figure 1).

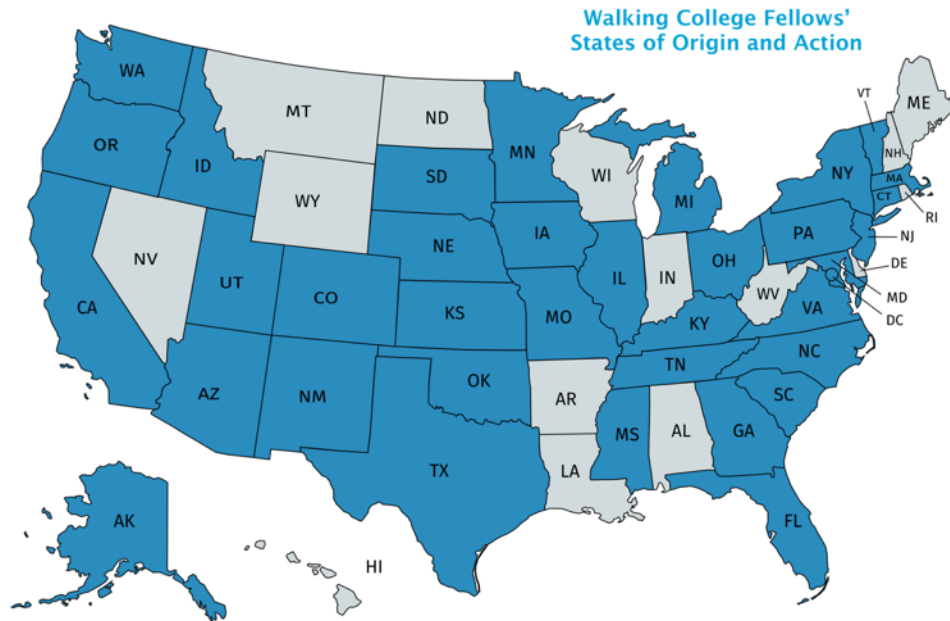


Figure 1: Home states of the Walking College Fellows whose work is reported in this study (Palau, Ontario, and British Columbia are not illustrated)

Walking Action Plans (WAPs)

Participants in both surveys were asked to estimate how much progress they had made so far towards their WAP goals. While the distributions from the two surveys were rather different (see Figure 2), the average self-reported progress during the first 1-2 years after graduating from the Walking College was close to 50% in both cases.

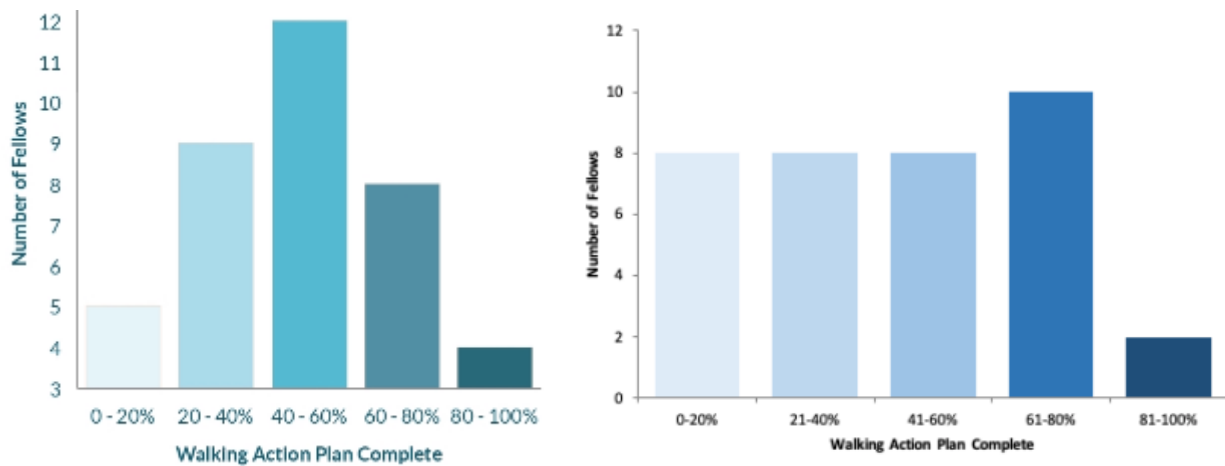


Figure 2: Self-reported progress towards WAP goals within 1-2 years by 2015/2016 Fellows (left) and 2017/18 Fellows (right)

The following examples illustrate the range of different types of WAP goals pursued by Fellows, along with their WAP completion percentages after 1-2 years:

- Adopt a Vision Zero policy for the City of Buffalo, NY (10%)
- Implement Complete Streets in Hopewell, VA to reduce pedestrian fatalities and increase community physical activity (42%)
- Conduct walking audits at 10 schools in Winter Park, FL, and develop infrastructure plans to overcome identified barriers (50%)
- Design and implement the Explore Malone (NY) Walk/Bike Challenge (60%)
- Host walking audits and engage “Priority Neighborhoods” in Columbia, MO in transportation policy (70%)
- Launch a “Safe Routes to Transit” program in Phoenix, AZ (72%)
- Work with the Oregon State House Speaker to install a high-visibility crosswalk across Columbia Blvd. – a designated freight route in Portland (96%)

Based on the combined results from the two surveys, five Fellows reported 100% completion of their primary WAP goals within 1-2 years:

- Establish a Walk Bike Advisory Committee for the Town of St. Johnsbury, VT
- Engage 8 rural hospital and 5 public health departments to participate in a messaging and communications campaign promoting walking and walkability in rural NE Iowa
- Get a Traffic Calming Ordinance passed by the (St. Louis, MO) Board of Alderman
- Advocate successfully for the construction of a two-mile long multi-use trail in the Monte Carlo neighborhood of Nogales, AZ
- Obtain a Walk-Friendly Community designation for Columbus, OH

The second survey (administered in the winter of 2019/2020) was intended to track the additional progress of the 2015 and 2016 Fellows, who had responded to the first survey. However, this proved difficult because so many of them had adopted new or different goals between the two surveys having either completed their original goals or run into challenges and changed direction. There were also examples of Fellows who broadened their goals and others who narrowed their focus.

As a result, it is not possible to compare progress towards WAP goals during years 3 and 4, with progress reported for years 1 and 2. It is also reasonable to assume that the direct impact of the Walking College would fade over time, and so it has been decided that future analyses will focus on progress and outcomes achieved by Fellows during the first 1-2 years.

Walking College Outcomes

Progress towards large, complex WAP goals requires dozens of smaller steps, such as writing an opinion article, organizing a Walk to School Day, and conducting policy research. In order to obtain a more granular understanding of the impact of the Walking College in the communities, a list of 46 specific walking and walkability outcomes, which may or may not have occurred, was developed and organized into seven categories.

Fellows were then asked which of these outcomes had actually occurred in their communities and (for those that had) the extent to which the Fellow’s participation in the Walking College had contributed, on a scale from “entirely” to “not at all” (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Outcomes reported by 2015 and 2016 Fellows as having occurred in their community within the first 1-2 years after completed the Walking College

Outcomes data reported by the two groups were similar:

- A total of 541 outcomes were reported by 2015 and 2016 Fellows (14.2 per Fellow, on average) versus 484 outcomes for the 2017 and 2018 Fellows (13.8 per Fellow).
- Fellows’ participation in the Walking College contributed to 441 (82%) of the outcomes for the 2015/16 group and to 417 (86%) for the 2017/18 group.
- The Walking College contributed “entirely” or “mostly” to 155 (29%) of the outcomes for the 2015/16 group and to 185 (38%) for the 2017/18 group.



Figure 4: Outcomes reported by 2017 and 2018 Fellows as having occurred in their community within the first 1-2 years after completed the Walking College

Conclusions

The following conclusions refer to the outcomes which occurred within the first 1-2 years after the combined cohort of 2015/16 and 2017/18 Fellows completed the Walking College.

Within 1-2 years of these 73 Fellows creating their Walking Action Plans:

- A total of 1,025 outcomes occurred in their communities.
- Fellows' participation in the Walking College contributed to 858 (84%) of these outcomes.
- The Walking College contributed "entirely" or "mostly" to 340 (33%) of these outcomes.

Most of the 858 outcomes related to the Walking College occurred in categories in which an individual or organization can largely control the outcome:

- Partnership Development: 191 outcomes (22%)
- Education and Communications: 179 outcomes (21%)
- Walking Events and Programs: 137 outcomes (16%)

Fewer outcomes occurred in those categories in which community-wide processes and/or government action are required:

- Public Policy: 68 outcomes (8%)
- Research and Planning: 106 outcomes (12%)
- Infrastructure: 126 outcomes (15%)
- Funding: 51 outcomes (6%)

The most common individual outcomes related to the Walking College were:

- Community event(s) held (60 Fellows, 82%)
- New partnership/coalition formed (52 Fellows, 71%)
- Public speaking opportunity delivered (46 Fellows, 63%)
- Walkability audit(s) conducted (45 Fellows, 62%)

Lastly, the Walking College has contributed (at least partly) to the adoption of 40 new policies:

- Vision Zero policies in 6 communities
- Complete Streets policies in 11 communities
- Other policies in 23 communities

In summary, Walking College Fellows have made significant positive changes in their communities. Within 1-2 years of completing the course, more than one thousand outcomes (for example, writing an opinion article, organizing a Walk to School Day, and conducting policy research) have occurred, one third of which "entirely" or "mostly" due to the Walking College. Of greatest impact, dozens of new policies designed to slow down traffic and add pedestrian infrastructure have been adopted.

BY GRACE XU AND IAN THOMAS

