

Capacity-Building at the Land Institute

[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) turns professionals into policy advocates. We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to climate, science to social impact – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society's most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Kelsey Whiting, Ph.D.](#), joined the Aspen Policy Academy's inaugural [Nonprofit Policy Training Fellowship](#) to help her organization, [the Land Institute](#), develop a more robust advocacy strategy. At the time, Kelsey was laying the groundwork for policy action at local, state, and federal levels, but she lacked the training required to effectively do so at scale. At the Academy, Kelsey worked to develop a policy action plan for the Land Institute, and the organization has now made significant gains in state and local agricultural policymaking.

BACKGROUND

Kelsey became a postdoctoral researcher at the Land Institute after being trained as a plant biologist and having studied plant breeding. The Land Institute, founded in 1976, is leading a global movement to develop perennial grain food crops and agriculture based on the principles of natural systems. These long-lived alternatives to major grains allow farmers to plant once and harvest a crop for three or more years without replanting.

Kelsey came to the Academy ready to learn, and walked away with the tools to understand the policy landscape of her agricultural research field to make a bigger impact. As part of her final project, she developed a proposal for the Land Institute to play a bigger role in perennial grain advocacy. Kelsey’s most important lesson from her policy training was that there are many pathways to create meaningful policy impact for nonprofit research organizations beyond drafting entirely new legislation. Kelsey developed confidence that the Land Institute can work in policy to support their researchers and collaborators even with limited capacity; they did not need to be a policy organization to do policy work.

“There are many ways to create meaningful policy impact for a nonprofit research organization.”

Kelsey Whiting, the Land Institute

IMPACT

The Land Institute now meaningfully engages in policy at the state and federal levels. At the state level, it is working to understand state-level issues and advocate with other Kansas-based organizations for new policies, such as supporting sustainable agriculture programs at universities. At the federal level, Kelsey and the Land Institute, in partnership with farmers and partners, are working to educate Congress and encourage them to appropriate funds for further research on perennial grains.

Kelsey’s ultimate goal is to ensure that all growers are aware of and easily able to use perennial grains where it makes sense on their land. She wants consumers to benefit from better nutrition because of the way Americans grow food and healthy ecosystem benefits. “I have zero doubt that better nutrition is the outcome if my policy work continues along this path. It will take a lot of work, understanding, and hard conversations, but it can happen. Aspen gave me the confidence to see that.” Kelsey also uses her Academy training on the ground by giving decisionmakers what they need to implement her ideas. With a Ph.D. in plant biology, it’s the opposite of how she was trained to talk about her work. Giving her “Bottom Line Up Front,” a crucial Academy strategy, has helped Kelsey improve as a communicator and a scientist.