

CCRC RESEARCH BRIEF

Number 59 | October 2015

Corridors of College Success Series

Lessons from the Corridors of College Success Initiative: An Introduction

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Years of effort along various lines have done little to alleviate disparities in educational and economic success in the United States. To be sure, some individual programs, interventions, and institutions have produced some small-scale improvements. But these have not translated into a systemic reduction in the gaps that exist in rates of college matriculation, postsecondary attainment, and family-sustaining employment across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

In recent years, communities around the country have begun to embrace a new model of educational and social intervention called *collective impact*. Collective impact aims to shift responsibility for improvement in outcomes from individual organizations to entire systems that affect the lives of people in a particular location. This place-based approach addresses the interconnected challenges of poverty, education, and economic independence, and recognizes that single organizations cannot solve these problems by themselves. Collective impact engages an array of stakeholders within a community and challenges them to work together to create a coherent organizational structure in which they are all driven by the same shared outcome goals (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2013).

What makes collective impact different from other forms of collaboration is its emphasis on a centralized “civic infrastructure” made up of committed community partners, its emphasis on shared measurement of indicators and outcomes across organizations, and its focus on continuous communication within a community (Kania & Kramer, 2011; StriveTogether, n.d.). A collective impact initiative is typically managed by a backbone organization that facilitates, convenes, and builds relationships among partners (OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, 2013; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012).

Performing such collective work is not easy. It requires a shift in paradigms, funding strategies, and interorganizational relationships. The question for those engaging in collective impact becomes: How do we do this work? It is one thing to want to try a new model; it is another to put that new model in place as a well-functioning initiative.

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The challenges are only magnified when the work targets higher education. Until recently, most collective impact work has focused on economic development (including efforts that target disconnected workers and youths), health, or early childhood and elementary education. But because economic independence is increasingly predicated on postsecondary credentials, it is essential to emphasize the college-and-career element of a cradle-to-career approach.

As collective impact has grown in prominence, a number of important organizations have written about the model, its potential impact, and examples of it in action.¹ CCRC's *Corridors of College Success Series* contributes to this body of literature in two new and important ways. First, we take a holistic approach. Rather than writing about single case studies or high-level theory, we look at multiple communities engaged in collective impact work to understand how these efforts play out on the ground, often in less-than-ideal circumstances. Second, we focus on communities working to bring higher education into the collective impact fold. Despite the growing interest in collective impact generally, there remain relatively few insights into how collective impact is situated in relation to the postsecondary sector.

Overview of Ford Corridors

The Ford Foundation established the Corridors of College Success initiative (often referred to as *Corridors*) to better understand and support place-based work related to postsecondary access and completion. Given the disproportionate role two-year colleges play in the education of low-income and first-generation students, this initiative focuses on community colleges as a locus of collective impact. The Ford Foundation supported five communities as they planned, organized, and applied a collective impact or place-based approach in order to improve pathways into and through college and into family-sustaining careers for low-income and first-generation students and other vulnerable populations.

The Corridors communities are diverse in terms of their geographic location and demographic makeup; they are also diverse in terms of what they focus on in their collective impact work and what stage of development they are

in. The communities are located in Los Angeles, California; Denver, Colorado; Boston, Massachusetts; New York City; and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas.² Though the communities were at different points in the collective process at the time of our study, all were committed to engaging a backbone organization and a local “anchor community college” to co-lead the work. In addition, all had received prior funding by the Ford Foundation to support pathways for low-income and first-generation students. The communities were also engaged in concerted efforts to improve college completion rates; often they were involved in multiple completion-oriented initiatives. Because each site was in a different (though still early) stage of work, the Corridors funding structure was not prescriptive; rather, it varied to reflect ongoing work and changing priorities. At any given time, each community was typically engaged in different work as part of the Corridors project.

To support the communities' work, the foundation provided resources in the form of strategic assistance from a group of national organizations: StriveTogether, Jobs for the Future, the Data Quality Campaign, and CCRC.³ Part of this assistance included in-depth qualitative research conducted by CCRC at each site. The research was used to identify each site's strengths and challenges in order to generate strategies for advancing the work. The rich data collected

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across sites through this research serves as the foundation for CCRC's *Corridors of College Success Series*.

The series draws on interviews with 108 stakeholders, focus groups and observations with stakeholders, and relevant documents collected at the five Corridors communities between July 2014 and

February 2015.⁴ The data we gathered is focused on how the postsecondary-oriented, place-based work is conducted and on how the work might improve postsecondary pathways and workforce preparedness among low-income, first-generation, and vulnerable students. Stakeholders

who participated in our research were chosen in consultation with staff from each community's backbone organization and/or anchor community college.

The participants included staff at community-based organizations, funders, and the backbone organization; K-12 district partners; representatives from governmental agencies; and students, faculty, staff, and administrators at the anchor community college. Interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured interview protocol that asked participants to reflect upon how services are funded and delivered; their community's ability to create a coherent pathway into, though, and out of postsecondary education; and the benefits, drawbacks, and challenges of collective work.

We analyzed the data twice. First, we analyzed it by site as part of our preparation for strategic assistance activities. This analysis helped us identify key themes and issues ripe for further exploration. We then used the site-specific analysis to create a coding scheme for the cross-site analyses presented in the current series of briefs. All interviews were coded for the cross-site analyses in Dedoose software in order to identify key points and substantiate our findings.

Introduction to the Series

The *Corridors of College Success Series* shares what we learned from our research. Based on our interview and other data, we pinpointed five key areas of concern relevant to stakeholders in place-based collective work. Briefs in this series address each area in order to provide information for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and researchers to consider as they engage in this critical work. The final brief provides cross-cutting conclusions. The topics covered in these briefs are described briefly below.

- **Collective impact: From theory to reality.** How do postsecondary-focused collective impact efforts play out on the ground? This brief identifies three major challenges to collective work, along with contextual factors that improve or inhibit communities' abilities to overcome those challenges.

- **Establishing the backbone.** Although backbone organizations are essential to collective success, communities struggle to identify and support these organizations. Current literature focuses on supporting established backbone organizations, but communities often need assistance in figuring out who should provide the backbone function.
- **Postsecondary engagement in collective impact.** Collective impact requires postsecondary institutions to engage in their communities in new ways, shifting from individual partnerships to a coordinated network of multiple partners working on broader collective involvement goals. However, this shift rarely happens, leaving postsecondary institutions on the periphery of collective impact efforts.
- **Funders and funding.** Collective impact initiatives require funders to support general backbone activities as well as programmatic efforts that are aligned with the collective goals. Our data indicate that collective impact funding does support basic backbone functioning, but it rarely extends to coordinated programmatic efforts aligned with the goals.
- **Community voice.** Community engagement is a critical component of collective impact work; however, merely acknowledging or soliciting community input is not sufficient. We find that prominent, intentional inclusion of the community voice is necessary, and may in fact be harder to achieve in collective impact initiatives focused on postsecondary education.

As a group, these briefs provide insight into the challenges of early-stage collective impact efforts. By pulling together data from multiple sites, they speak to broad issues and potential solutions. Though focused on postsecondary collective impact, they may be useful to stakeholders engaged in a wide range of efforts to promote educational and economic opportunity for individuals who struggle to achieve social mobility.

Endnotes

1. In particular, FSG (<http://www.fsg.org/>), which is credited with coining the phrase “collective impact,” works with communities engaged in collective work and, in partnership with the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and others, has produced a variety of resources and case studies. StriveTogether (<http://www.strivetgether.org/>) also produces case studies and white papers with a particular focus on cradle-to-career collective impact.
2. The communities themselves represent smaller areas within these cities and regions. However, to maintain confidentiality for research participants, we provide only the general locations.
3. Each organization provided assistance on a different part of the work. StriveTogether, for example, helped sites build out and coordinate their civic infrastructure, while the Data Quality Campaign helped sites plan or develop coherent data systems. Strategic assistance was provided in accordance with site needs; each community therefore received help from different partners and at different times during the project.
4. Many interviews were conducted in group settings; including individual and group interviews and focus groups, we spoke with nearly 125 individuals over the course of our fieldwork.

References

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