CCRC RESEARCH BRIEF

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Establishing the Backbone: An Underexplored Facet of Collective Impact Efforts

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Coinciding with a growing interest in collective impact efforts, an increasing number of foundations, policymakers, and practitioners are recommending that multi-sector partnerships make use of a backbone. A backbone is an entity that functions independently as a centralized management team for partnership efforts. While the idea of using a backbone has gained currency, little attention has been paid to how to establish a backbone. Instead, much of the prevailing discussion has focused on what a backbone should do after it has been formed.

In theory, better understanding all the types of functions an effective backbone should be able to perform ought to help new collective impact partnerships know what to look for in a potential backbone organization. Yet collective impact proponents have provided such detailed information about so many backbone functions that it may be difficult to identify organizations capable of carrying out such a complex role. Adding to the difficulty, the literature of resources on how to structure a backbone is limited and sometimes contradictory, leaving sites with little guidance concerning best practices for organizing and staffing a backbone. Research on the Ford Corridors of College Success initiative[1] reveals that communities that want to engage in the collective impact approach need more help in the process of creating a backbone. This brief describes the challenges that early-stage collective impact communities face as they work to identify potential backbone organizations and establish a backbone structure.

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Defining the Backbone Role and Its Functions

Widely credited with codifying collective impact as a distinct model, Kania and Kramer (2011) first identified "backbone support organizations" as one of five core components that are necessary to make collective impact efforts successful. The backbone supports the initiative as a whole by integrating the efforts of multiple partners working toward the same goal. The use of a backbone distinguishes collective impact from other forms of

collaboration in which multiple organizations partner but do not establish a separate entity dedicated to overseeing partnership activities (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012).

Proponents of collective impact generally agree that the primary role of the backbone is to coordinate the work of partners, even though various advocates may invoke different terms—"anchor entity," "cat herder," "orchestra conductor," "quarterback"—to describe this role (Edmondson, 2013; Erickson, Galloway, & Cytron, 2012; StriveTogether, 2015; Turner, 2015). Proponents also routinely discuss a number of specific functions that a backbone performs in its coordinating role. Although they are described in slightly different ways, typical functions that are mentioned in the literature include establishing a shared vision; managing data collection, analysis, and dissemination; directing day-to-day partnership activities; developing public relations strategies; fundraising; and policy advocacy (Collective Impact Forum, n.d.; Edmondson, 2013; Erickson, Galloway, & Cytron, 2012; Turner, 2015; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012).

In the collective impact literature, descriptions of these various functions are often accompanied by more detailed information about the activities involved in each function. The most extensive of these descriptions, a "backbone toolkit" produced by the Collective Impact Forum (n.d.),[2] defines four backbone functions (maintaining overall strategic coherence, coordinating through the steering committee, supporting fundraising and outreach, and establishing and supporting working groups) and outlines a total of 43 related strategic activities (e.g., oversight, policy work) and logistical activities (e.g., meeting facilitation, scheduling) across the four functions. While these descriptions of potential backbone functions and activities offer important guidance about what a backbone organization should do to be effective, they do not offer insight into how to identify organizations that might be effective in fulfilling the backbone role.

Flexibility in the Backbone Structure

Collective impact proponents often emphasize flexibility in the backbone structure in order to make it easier to tailor the model to particular local contexts. For example, the literature indicates that a number of different organizations can operate as the backbone, including community-based organizations, foundations, government agencies, schools, and for-profit companies (Erickson, Galloway, & Cytron, 2012; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012; Turner, 2015).

What is more, two of the most active collective impact networks in the country, the Collective Impact Forum and StriveTogether, have suggested that the backbone role can be shared by multiple organizations (Collective Impact Forum, n.d.; Edmondson, 2013; StriveTogether, 2015). Indeed StriveTogether argues that it is not only possible to share the backbone role but that it may be infeasible for a single organization to carry out all essential backbone functions. StriveTogether has thus proposed that the backbone role should be viewed as a series of separate functions carried out by individuals who may or may not come from the same organization (Edmondson, 2013; StriveTogether, 2015).

In contrast to the robust literature defining the backbone role, proponents generally provide little guidance on how to select one or more backbone organizations.

This emphasis on flexibility has led to ambiguity regarding best practices, however, as other collective impact proponents still advocate having a single organization serve as the backbone (Turner, 2015). In contrast to the robust literature defining the backbone role, proponents generally provide little guidance on how to select one or more backbone organizations. They do not discuss, for example, the broader benefits and drawbacks of working with an existing organization versus individuals from multiple organizations, or how to choose from among various types of organizations (Bockstette & Sud, 2015).

Backbones in the Corridors Project

In our research on the Ford Corridors of College Success initiative, we visited five sites that were in various stages in their collective impact projects. Our interviews with site participants suggest that while these sites were in the initial stages of coming together to form a collective impact partnership, advice about the utility of a flexible backbone structure in combination with an extensive list of potential backbone functions and activities provided inadequate guidance on how to develop a backbone that is capable of carrying out its mandate. The sheer number of possible options for structuring the backbone can become overwhelming, our interviewees told us, making it difficult to assess what structure would be the most effective in a given context.

Not surprisingly, we found a large variety of organizations serving as backbones across eight initiatives at the five Corridors sites we studied.[3] Backbones across the sites consisted of: a single community-based organization, personnel from two different community-based organizations, a city government department, a state government department, a foundation, a public-private partnership, a non-profit housed within a chamber of commerce, and an external consultant. Thus, in seven out of the eight initiatives we observed, a single organization was carrying out the backbone role. In the remaining one, two community-based organizations were sharing the role.

One of the early-stage initiatives was having a particularly difficult time establishing a backbone as they weighed different options for structuring the backbone and evaluated different types of organizations that could potentially carry out backbone functions. Using the experience of that initiative as a case study, we discuss next how one group of stakeholders identified and established a backbone.

Case Study: Wrestling With Backbone Options

The Corridors site highlighted in this brief is an early-stage initiative in an urban setting and is undertaking multiple collective impact efforts. We chose to discuss this site to illustrate the types of issues that new initiatives may struggle with as they seek to establish a backbone. The stakeholders at this site—who represented city and state government agencies, foundations, the public school system, the higher education sector, and community-based organizations—were nearly unanimous in their agreement about the need for a backbone, both to coordinate the Corridors initiative and to align it with existing postsecondary initiatives—yet they could not identify an organization that seemed capable of fulfilling several important backbone functions. In deliberating on the issue, the stakeholders repeatedly called attention to three attributes they felt were crucial to the primary coordinating role of the backbone: a reputation for being neutral, the ability to convene actors and entities from diverse sectors, and prior experience engaging in similar collaborative work. In addition, the stakeholders also identified important backbone functions: fundraising, data collection, and evaluation of the collective impact efforts.

Even after carefully weighing the pros and cons of both individual organizations and general organizational types against these criteria, none emerged as clear frontrunners.

Community-based organizations were most frequently mentioned as likely backbone candidates. However, while some stakeholders felt that community-based organizations' deep roots positioned them to be effective conveners, others expressed concern about their capacity to coordinate a major initiative. They worried that the larger and seemingly better-equipped community-based organizations were already operating at maximum capacity through their involvement with numerous other initiatives, and that the smaller organizations simply lacked sufficient staff and resources.

Stakeholders identified both the *city government* and the *public school system* as entities that had long histories of

Potential Benefits and Challenges of Different Types of Backbones Identified by the Case Study Site

Organization Type	Potential Benefits	Potential Challenges
Community-based organization	Roots in the community	Low capacity (perceived lack of time, staff, and/or resources)
City government	History of convening diverse stakeholders	Too political
Public school system	History of convening diverse stakeholders	Too political
Postsecondary institution	Demonstrated leadership in partnering with the community	Competition between local colleges
Workforce organization	Connections to the labor market	Lack of knowledge about education sectors
Multiple organizations	Distribution of responsibilities according to organizational expertise	More difficult to act as a single unit

convening multiple groups, but they felt that both were too political and would not be viewed as neutral.

Similarly, one of the local *postsecondary institutions* was well-respected for its leadership in partnering with the community, but there was a concern that competition between local colleges vying to recruit the same students and partner with the same businesses would impede the ability of any one of them to coordinate a long-term collective effort.

Given that the Corridors initiative emphasizes pathways from postsecondary education to careers, a few stakeholders suggested that a *workforce representative* could bring valuable knowledge and labor market connections to the backbone role. However, another worried that workforce organizations would not have a broad enough reach or enough knowledge about other segments in college-to-career pathways to provide a strong coordinating role.

Finally, acknowledging that "no one agency does everything or does it well," a few stakeholders considered the possibility of having multiple organizations share the backbone role. However, one stakeholder also expressed concern that involving multiple organizations would increase the difficulty of coordinating the initiative by making it more challenging for the backbone to operate as a united entity.

Recognizing the importance of the backbone but lacking a clear candidate, the site hired a temporary consultant to manage the project. Importantly, the consultant had deep knowledge of the community and had connections to many local business, education, and government leaders. As a result, the consultant was able to identify additional key stakeholders engaged in work related to the Corridors initiative. The consultant convened a powerful steering committee representing crucial players from core sectors at the heart of the Corridors' work on college-to-career pathways. Rather than immediately launching into that work, the steering committee first took steps to identify and establish a permanent backbone. The collective impact literature typically depicts the convening of a steering committee as something that the backbone itself coordinates. However, formally bringing stakeholders together as a committee before the backbone was established enabled this site to address the challenge of establishing a backbone collaboratively. Formulation of a steering committee early on also allowed the site to move forward with work that had been in danger of stalling without clear leadership.

In order to identify a permanent backbone, the steering committee released a request for proposals inviting organizations to apply for the role. In what is perhaps a telling indicator of the difficulty of identifying a backbone, the committee ultimately selected an organization that none of the interview participants had thought of or mentioned—another independent consulting firm that up until that point had not been involved in the initiative.

Conclusion

The experience of the Corridors site profiled in this brief highlights the difficulties that are faced when trying to identify an appropriate organization or set of organizations to fulfill the backbone role. Taking on all the responsibilities of the backbone is often perceived as being too broad or too much work for a single organization to manage. At the same time, there is limited guidance on how to structure shared responsibilities among multiple organizations. Large organizations may be viewed as being overly bureaucratic, but small organizations may be seen as lacking the capacity to balance their current work with that of the new initiative. Ideally, a backbone organization should have a history of carrying out similar collaborative work but should not be engaged in so many contemporaneous efforts that it lacks the capacity to take on substantial work for the new initiative. The backbone also needs enough political capital to convene actors in multiple, diverse sectors but should still be viewed as neutral and impartial. The backbone needs a wide reach but should still have community roots. The backbone needs sector-specific expertise (e.g., about labor market pathways) but should also have cross-sector knowledge.

Although the concept of a backbone often resonates with stakeholders, in practice the process of identifying and establishing a backbone is challenging. The emphasis in the collective impact literature on defining all of the various functions that a backbone might carry out, while well-intentioned, may overshadow the need to understand how backbones themselves are best formed. Communities need more support during the initial stages of establishing a backbone. Those involved in launching new collective impact partnerships should plan on devoting significant time and care to the process of identifying and establishing the backbone, and national collective impact networks may wish to consider developing additional resources to support partnerships through the process.

Given the experiences of the Corridors site profiled here we offer the following recommendations for communities that are considering collective impact initiatives:

- Do not feel compelled to identify an organization (or organizations) with expertise in all of the backbone functions identified by collective impact proponents.

- Recognize that there are pros and cons to various backbone structures.

- Consider using an objective, third-party consultant to help manage the process of establishing a backbone.

- Use the collective impact literature as a guide to think about what may work well for the community rather than as a rigid rulebook.

- Do not let the quest for a "perfect" backbone stall the entire initiative—be thoughtful and critical but decisive in order to maintain momentum.

Endnotes

1. For an introduction to this research, see Karp and Lundy-Wagner (2015).

2. The Collective Impact Forum is a joint initiative operated by FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions: http://collectiveimpactforum.org/.

3. For more information on the five sites and the Ford Corridors projects undertaken to improve pathways into and through college and into family-sustaining careers, see Karp and Lundy-Wagner (2015). In three of the five sites, other education-related collective impact initiatives were occurring in addition to, or as a complement to, the Corridors project. In these instances, stakeholders were often involved in more than one collective impact project. As a result, we were able to learn about how eight different initiatives managed the backbone role as well as how collective impact initiatives interact with one another.

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