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Beyond the Buzzword: Examining Collective Impact as a Framework for Cross-Sector Collaboration

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Abstract

Despite the sizable financial and human capital investment in the nonprofit sector, large-scale social issues, such as poverty and hunger, continue to plague our society. Collective impact, a framework for cross-sector collaboration that emerged in 2011, offers a method to harness the capabilities of each sector to generate systems-level change. In this paper, the author examines the strengths and weaknesses of collective impact by conducting interviews with stakeholders from a collective impact initiative addressing education in a mid-sized city in the United States. This study reports the findings, implications, and recommendations gained from a qualitative analysis of the interview data.

Introduction

Despite the sizeable financial and human capital investment in the nonprofit sector, large-scale social issues, such as poverty and hunger, continue to plague our society. In 2015, \$373 billion were contributed to the nonprofit sector in the United States (US) (Giving USA, 2016). These funds originated from individuals (71%), foundations (16%), bequests (9%), and corporations (5%) (Giving USA, 2016). The complexities of this sector and the scale of the issues prevent nonprofits from solving social issues independently (Kania and Kramer, 2011). Cross-sector collaboration offers a way for society to harness the strengths of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and generate systems-level change. Collective impact is a buzzword that gained popularity in 2011 after the Stanford Social Innovation Review published the seminal article by Kania and Kramer (2011). Collective impact has since emerged as a framework for cross-sector collaboration.

The goal of this research study is to examine the effectiveness of the collective impact framework as a model of cross-sector collaboration. To gain deeper insight into the strengths and weaknesses of collective impact, the author conducted interviews with stakeholders of a collective impact initiative in a mid-sized city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US. This article reports the findings, implications, and recommendations that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interview data.

Collaboration as a Solution

To create systems-level change, organizations from each sector—public, private and nonprofit—aim to enact strategic, collaborative, and innovative approaches to solve social problems (Murphy, Arenas, & Batista, 2015; Misra & Maxwell, 2016). Systems-level change is a term used in many disciplines generally to refer to policy reforms and community impact. For

the purpose of this study, systems-level change refers to addressing the root cause of problems and solving large-scale social problems. Stakeholders must understand the root causes of problems impacting social issues. Once the causes of problems are known, solutions such as policy changes, organizational goals, and necessary collaborations are identifiable (Misra & Maxwell, 2016).

To address the issues of effectiveness and impact, nonprofit organizations may look to collaboration as a possible solution. Cross-sector collaboration is when stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sector collaborate or form partnerships around various initiatives. The advantages of collaborating with other organizations are improved learning, resource efficiency, increased capacity, the ability to solve complex problems, and improved service (Provan & Kenis, 2008).

There are several models and frameworks of collaboration, including network governance, partnerships, and collective impact. No one model has proven effective or received wide acceptance. The current research on collaboration only offers best practices without identifying any one model as the standard to be used by all collaborative initiatives. Successful collaboration is not easy to achieve and positive results are not guaranteed (Page, Stone, Bryson, & Crosby, 2015). Thus, before a model can be widely adopted by the nonprofit sector, frameworks for collaborations must be examined.

Collective Impact.

One example of cross-sector collaboration is the collective impact model. Collective impact allows multiple stakeholders from each sector to take a strategic approach to systems-level change and address the contemporary concerns of nonprofits to create real social change

(Kania & Kramer, 2011). Collective impact is a fairly new concept and only recently has gained recognition in the nonprofit sector.

Despite its popularity, collective impact has no standard definition (Karp, & Lundy-Wagner, 2016, p. 1). Interpretations of collective impact vary based on organization, sector, and individual experience. “Collective Impact can best be understood as a synthesis of practice-based principles for those seeking to build alliances and coalitions to tackle complex problems in local communities” (Christens & Inzeo, 2015, p. 426). According to Kania and Kramer,

Collective Impact Initiatives are long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization (2011, p. 39).

The framework for collective impact is similar to other community organizing initiatives, as both employ process models to guide the work forward (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). However, collective impact formalizes collaboration by creating a structure of multiple community stakeholders working together to solve complex social issues (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The unique feature of the collective impact framework is the backbone organization, formed with the purpose of facilitating the collective impact initiative.

Research Objectives

The guiding question of this study is: what are the strengths and weaknesses of using collective impact as a method of cross-sector collaboration? The main objectives of this study are to better understand collective impact, to analyze the experience and perspectives of individuals participating in collective impact, to evaluate if systems-level change is achieved

through collective impact, and to identify ways to improve collective impact as an avenue for cross-sector collaboration. Currently there is a gap in collective impact research. The study of collective impact is primarily theoretical and conceptual. This research study is designed to obtain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of collective impact. To accomplish this, stakeholders involved in a collective impact initiative were interviewed to understand the perspectives of the individuals involved. The results of this study contribute to the research on collective impact by providing insights into the advantages and disadvantages of using collective impact as a model of cross-sector collaboration to address large-scale social issues.

This study provides an in-depth analysis of one collective impact initiative. The organization under study is the backbone organization of a collective impact initiative in a mid-sized city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the US. To protect the identities of the participants and the organization involved, the backbone organization of the collective impact initiative is identified using the pseudonym Connect Group. Connect Group uses data and joint action to advance its main priority of improving education and workforce preparedness from cradle to career, meaning birth to graduation. The staff of Connect Group includes two full-time employees and one part-time employee. Connect Group is housed within a university that covers administrative costs, such as payroll, rent, utilities, and human resources. A Leadership Council governs the Connect Group. The Leadership Council provides executive leadership and serves as advocates for the Connect Group within the community. The Steering Committee provides operational support and a Resource Committee provides fiscal oversight. Both committees report to the Leadership Council. To address its three main initiatives, Connect Group formed three collaborative action networks (CANs) focused on school attendance, literacy, and career

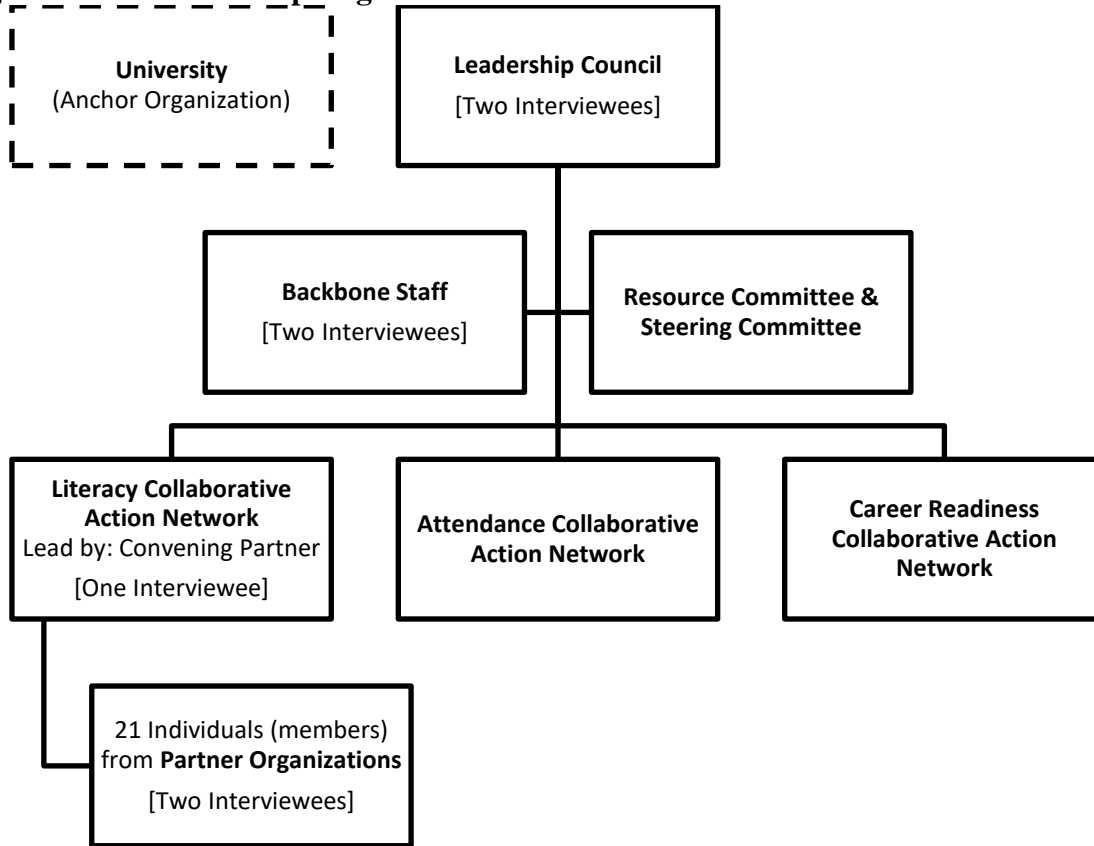
readiness. Each network is comprised of volunteer network members who meet regularly to discuss the progress toward their network goals.

Methods

The author conducted interviews with seven individuals involved in the collective impact initiative. The sample included staff members, Leadership Council members, and volunteers serving on collaborative action networks (CANs) of Connect Group. All of the study participants were selected from the literacy CAN to obtain an in-depth study of one network.

The author identified sixteen individuals from the staff, Leadership Council and literacy collaborative action network to participate in the interview process. The author had contact information for several of the potential participants from attending past events organized by the collective impact initiative. For the subjects not personally known by the author, contact information was obtained from listings on public websites.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the author's institution approved each aspect of the study, including the recruitment email, consent form, and interview questions (see Appendix A). Recruitment emails were sent to the sixteen identified individuals. The recruitment list included three staff members, three of the fifteen Leadership Council members, nine of the twenty-one literacy CAN members, and the convening partner of the literacy CAN. The convening partner is an individual responsible for leading one of the collaborative action networks, in this case, the literacy CAN. Of the sixteen contacted, seven agreed to participate. The sample includes two staff members, two Leadership Council members, two literacy CAN members, and the literacy CAN convening partner (See Figure 1). The author determined that the sample was adequate for the exploratory purposes of this study.

Figure 1. Connect Group Organizational Structure**Instruments.**

The author utilized an interview protocol for data collection. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with questions selected to elicit information on the following subjects: purpose, structure, strengths, weaknesses, growth, and learning (see Appendix A). During each interview the author took field notes and the audio was recorded and transcribed using a mobile application called “Just Press Record” (By Open Planet Software). Once the recordings were transcribed, the original recordings were deleted. To maintain confidentiality, all interview transcripts and notes were de-identified so that individual and organization names, and any other identifiable information was altered, removed, and/or kept out of reports and presentations as needed. The gathered data was compiled into one document and thematically analyzed (Engel &

Schutt, 2012). The data was reviewed and categorized into themes. Sub-themes that emerged from each theme are presented in the findings.

Findings

The themes fall under the following headings: purpose, structure, strengths, weaknesses, and lessons learned. The sub-themes are listed in Figure 2 and described in the sections below.

Theme	Sub-themes
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining Collective Impact
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anchor • Capacity • Communication • Delegation
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data-driven Decisions • Data Repository • Trust • Systems-level Change
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance • Community Voice • Missing Sectors • Capacity • Model
Lessons Learned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Silver Bullet • Launch

Figure 2. Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Purpose.

According to most interviewees, the collective impact framework is addressing the identified social problem. Interviewees noted that organizations within each sector often are addressing one part of the problem. Nonprofits, government agencies, and for-profits are commonly operating in silos. The lack of communication leads to duplicated efforts, wasted resources, and unmet needs. Interviewees argued that to address such complex problems, a complex solution is needed.

Defining collective impact.

Each interviewee agreed that collaboration across sectors is necessary to address large-scale social problems—that is, they had a shared understanding of the purpose of the framework. Each interviewee offered a slightly different definition, yet each interpretation did include many of the same elements such as a united vision, common goals, shared data and metrics, collaboration, and a convening organization. The backbone organization (backbone) plays a key role in the facilitation of the convening partners and the participating organizations. Participants shared that the backbone collects and tracks the data to guide the decisions of the organizations. Interviewees shared that continuous improvement and results based leadership are key components of the collective impact model. The elements of collective impact cited by interviewees are similar to the definition and framework offered by Kania and Kramer in the seminal study of collective impact, which is based on the Strive Together model (Who we are, n.d.). Connect Group is an affiliate organization of Strive Together.

Interviewees stated that the lack of a common definition dilutes the potential of collective impact. Participants had differing definitions and many cited the confusion from outside stakeholders. According to participants, collective impact is a new term that is unfamiliar to individuals outside of collective impact. To gain support, potential funders and partners needed to understand what collective impact was and what gap it was established to fill.

Structure.

The structure section presents the organizational structure, capacity, and communication challenges identified by the participants. The Connect Group has undergone two iterations. The Connect Group was an initiative of a university that adopted the Strive Together model of collective impact (Who we are, n.d.). Participants stated that at its inception, a director,

unfamiliar with the collective impact model, led the organization. The inexperienced leadership left participants feeling discouraged and confused and interviewees noted other partners appeared to feel this way as well. The organization restructured and the leadership and staff changed to the current structure. Interviewees seemed encouraged by the restructure and hopeful that the leadership changes would drive the mission forward. Participants agreed that the backbone organization is the driver of the initiative, so the staff, resources, and capacity need to be effective in order to perform efficiently. The organization is currently undergoing another restructure. These changes were based on feedback from the Leadership Council and the other partners.

Anchor.

A unique feature of the collective impact initiative under study is the existence of an anchor organization. A university created the original collective impact initiative that later established into a separate organization. The university still serves as a major source of resources, so it is referred to as an anchor of the initiative. An anchor provides more than financial resources to the initiative. Participants stated that the anchor serves as the financial agent, provides office space, equipment, supplies, backroom administrative services (e.g., human resources and payroll), and oversees the backbone staff. Interviewees agreed that when one organization serves as the sole anchor, the backbone organization is not free to act as a stand-alone organization. While the anchor organization is a valuable resource and provides financial support, the collective impact work is inhibited by this relationship. To address the structural concerns, the Connect Group is expanding the number of anchor organizations, also referred to as anchor partnerships. The structure is moving to a decentralized model to obtain stronger partnerships, share the work, and increase the organizational capacity. The Connect Group is

partnering with the local United Way office to hire a data manager to collect and analyze the large amount of data being collected. The data manager will be a United Way employee, but the Connect Group will pay a portion of the salary. In addition to United Way, the organization is partnering with two local foundations that will be serving as anchor organizations.

Participants stated that decentralizing the anchor relationship allows the partner organizations to increase the sense of ownership and decrease the perceived autocratic structure. The anchor partners are all from the nonprofit sector, so participants mentioned that Connect Group should consider expanding anchor relationships to the public and for-profit sectors in the future. This would help Connect Group increase capacity, obtain expertise from the for-profit sector, and further the sense of collaboration in the region.

Capacity.

Interviewees explained the current organizational structure and provided details about the limited capacity of the organization. The backbone staff of Connect Group consists of an executive director, a project coordinator, and a part-time graduate assistant. Participants argued that the limited staff capacity results in longer completion time for work items and gaps in required skill sets (e.g., public relations and resource development). Most interviewees mentioned the need for additional staff support. Connect Group is currently working on this issue by employing a data manager. This employee will help increase capacity and drive data use. In addition to a data manager, interviewees mentioned the need for more employees experienced in marketing, policy, and development. Due to the lack of understanding and clarity of the definition of collective impact and the work being done by the Connect Group, obtaining development and marketing expertise would increase awareness and organizational sustainability. The end goal of the organization is to create systems-level change in the

education realm. To facilitate the changes, a policy expert needs to help drive the process forward. Obtaining funding for the backbone organization has been difficult. Funders want to fund programs and direct service delivery organizations. Hiring a development professional would help the organization build capacity and steward relationships with current donors.

Communication.

Several participants stated concerns regarding communication practices of Connect Group; however, not all participants mentioned communication as an area of improvement. One example of a concern that was voiced was the lack of communication between levels of Connect Group. The convening leaders of the collaborative action networks (CANs) have meetings to discuss their experiences on the teams, but the information is not shared with the Leadership Council. The convening leaders of the CANs do not have direct communication with the Leadership Council. The lack of communication prevents the sharing of progress to the leaders. Due to this lack of communication, leaders perceive that the organization is not making an impact. Several interviewees also cited the need for clarity around the roles and expectations of the partner organizations and Leadership Council members. When partners understand their role, engagement increases. Interviewees proposed that the purpose and goals of the collaboration should be shared before each meeting to remind and reinforce each partner's role in achieving the goals. Interviewees argued that partners must understand that the organization is not just holding meetings, but it is an organization convening partners to drive change.

Delegation.

The collective impact staff project coordinator leads one CAN and a convening partner from United Way leads another CAN. The Collect Group had not activated the third CAN at the time of this study. According to the participants, the majority of the work falls on the leaders of

each CAN. The leaders received facilitation and results based leadership training from Strive Together to obtain skills necessary to facilitate meetings with the volunteers. Some interviewees were surprised by the time commitment and scope of involvement required and suggested that expectations should be clearly communicated prior to onboarding volunteers. The CAN leaders focus on continuous improvement and increasing engagement among partners. Connect Group is adaptive to change and makes adjustments based on data and feedback from partners. One example was the change to increase the number of anchor partners, a strategic decision by the leadership council, to disperse the responsibilities among more stakeholders.

Strengths.

The strengths section presents the identified benefits of using the collective impact model to create change. Interviewees agreed that the collective impact framework mobilizes partners around a specific community issue and it engages members from nonprofit, for-profit, and the public sector. The partner organizations share a clear vision and goals to achieve its mission. In addition to the collaborative framework, the interviewees identified other strengths—such as, data, data repository, trust, and systems-level change—of the collective impact model, described below.

Data-driven decisions.

The collective impact model is characterized by capturing data and leveraging continuous improvement. Participants stated that the data-driven process of collective impact is one of the top strengths of the model. The model uses program and outcome data to drive decisions. The convening partners facilitate continuous improvement exercises to teach the partners the techniques of using data to drive decisions and process changes. The exposure of partner organizations to data creates a culture of data use. There were several examples where

interviewees stated partners are using data within their own organizations to drive decision-making.

Data repository.

One interviewee identified a unique role in the community that could be filled by Connect Group. With the already established data sharing agreements with the school districts, Connect Group could serve as a repository for educational data. Connect Group could be the point organization for nonprofits and the public sector to obtain educational data. The data could be shared with funders, nonprofits, and public entities. The organization could work with the schools to pull and share data, help funders understand the outcomes they should be looking for, and then help nonprofits understand what funders want to see from them. However, participants shared that this is not possible without building trust and relationships among partners.

Trust.

The collective impact framework encourages sharing resources from other organizations that creates efficiencies and promotes learning. All of the interviewees mentioned the importance of building trust and cultivating relationships. Collective impact convenes leaders across sectors to think differently about the issues they are dealing with collectively. Participants in this initiative built trust and cultivated new relationships with other participating organizations. This model promotes peer accountability as opposed to traditional staff accountability. This reduces the burden to the staff, because the partners hold each other accountable. The relationships and trust among partners is what has allowed the Connect Group to obtain data sharing agreements from school districts.

Systems-level change.

The goal of collective impact is systems-level change. The interviewees were divided on

the changes that were being made in the cradle to career education continuum. The examples of systems-level change shared by participants include the measurement of data and measured outcomes. The organization is positively improving the metrics that define success based on the goals of each CAN. The Connect Group is a member of Strive Together and part of the agreement is to complete evaluations to measure success. The collective impact initiative has demonstrated improvements to the indicators of success. Connect Group has made some systems-level changes by impacting the way data and outcomes are measured from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The regional school districts are now measuring the same data points. This allows the data from each location to be shared and analyzed in the same way. When the data is aligned, it is easier to identify what has improved and what needs to be changed to see improvements. Some participants stated that the initiative has not created complete systems-level change yet, but that there was potential to do so in the future.

Weaknesses.

While collective impact offers a formalized framework of collaboration, the practical implementation sheds light on the limitations of the model. Interviewees identified the gaps and areas for improvement with the current framework. This section outlines some of the limitations and problems encountered by Connect Group, which were resistance, community voice, missing sectors, capacity, and model, as described below.

Resistance.

People at the senior level of organizations can be resistant to change for various reasons. Concern for the livelihood of their organization can play a role in the willingness of leaders to make changes to processes. Some participants expressed concern that egos and regionalism impact the decisions of stakeholders and prior relationships among partners also create

challenges. Organizations may have collaborated on past projects and now are engaged with the collective impact initiative creating a conflict of interest. There is history among people—not just organizations. Relationships built among member organizations shifted to a new environment and created interpersonal challenges that must be addressed.

Community voice.

Participants stated that one of the weaknesses of the collective impact framework is the lack of community voice. The partner organizations and the members of the Leadership Council are primarily nonprofit and public sector professionals. Community members are valuable resources and offer insights not available to industry professionals. For long-term solutions to be achieved, community members and clients of the partner organizations should be engaged at some level.

Missing sectors.

In addition to community voice, some interviewees felt the collective impact initiative was lacking representation from the business community. The volunteers, also referred to as partners, are primarily from the nonprofit and public sectors. Several interviewees noted the lack of for-profit partners. The collective impact model is supposed to have representation from each of the sectors, so a for-profit presence is currently lacking. If the collaboration is truly a cradle to career initiative, for-profit partners could provide expertise with job preparation and workforce development. Furthermore, for-profit partners can contribute additional funding support to help the initiative increase capacity and promote sustainability.

Capacity.

As with other nonprofit organizations, Connect Group is forced to operate with limited resources. Several interviewees mentioned that obtaining funding for a backbone organization is

difficult. With the increase in anchor partners, the organization hopes to obtain more sustainable support. With a growing number of anchor partners, there will also be an increase in the number of responsibilities for the backbone staff. The collective impact model relies on data that the organization must interpret before acting. The creation of a data manager position will help with managing this portion of the model. In addition to the backbone organization, the partner organizations have limited capacity. They must manage their own organizations in addition to participating in the network and instituting changes and new data collecting systems. For these reasons, much of the work falls on the convening partner and staff to manage the network. Interviewees shared that the backbone organization needs additional staff capacity to keep up with growth.

Model.

The interviewees agreed that the collective impact model is complex. The model is very structured yet abstract, because there are few practical examples. Additionally, each collaboration takes on a different shape based on the organizations and individuals involved. The participating individuals have different definitions and understandings of collective impact. The definition and vision of the organization should be clearly communicated and understood by the partners. With a shared definition, the organization will be able to articulate the message to others and deepen the understanding among partner members. Participants also cited the challenges experienced by the backbone organization described in the sections above.

Lessons Learned.

The lessons learned section includes cautions to individuals planning to implement collective impact. Participants gained knowledge from participating in the collective impact

initiative. Based on their experience they each identified several key elements to create an effective collective impact initiative.

People.

Interviewees shared that the right people are the foundation of a successful collaboration. The quality of the individuals is more important than the quantity of individuals. Committed partners drive collective impact. Interviewees agreed that momentum could be built with a smaller group of champions as the organization scales up. Collective impact requires participants from the nonprofit, for-profit, and public sectors. The voice of the community should be present to ensure that the representatives from the sectors are not reinforcing norms, but actually making sustainable changes. To obtain community voice, participants argued that it was important to be cognizant of work schedules. For example, it is difficult for teachers to take time off during the school day to participate in network meetings. Finally, building trust and relationships is imperative to success. Partners need to trust each other in order to make high-level decisions that impact their organizations.

Silver bullet.

Collective impact is not a panacea for large-scale social problems. Partners need to be aware that collective impact is messy. The fluidity of the process and continuous improvement leads to constant change within the organizational structure and processes. Collective impact can make advancements forward and then face setbacks. For this reason, committed partners increase the sustainability of collective impact. One interviewee noted the similarities between collective impact and community organizing. Both processes have elements of grassroots initiatives that take time to see tangible impact.

Launch.

The timing of the launch is important. Collective impact should not be launched prematurely. One interviewee cautioned against making a spectacle of the launch and overpromising the outcomes. For example, an interviewee mentioned that Connect Group made a public launch and overpromised outcomes. Later when the initiatives faced challenges, a restructuring occurred that caused original partners to lose confidence and leave the partnership. Interviewees shared that due to the complexity of collective impact and the challenges partners face, it is better to start small and scale up. For example, the lessons learned from launching one CAN could be used when launching the next CAN. The model is based on continuous improvement, so processes are subject to change by nature of the collaboration. Interviewees explained that organizational outcomes are evaluated and changes are made to increase effectiveness. For example, the Connect Group is currently going through another phase of restructuring.

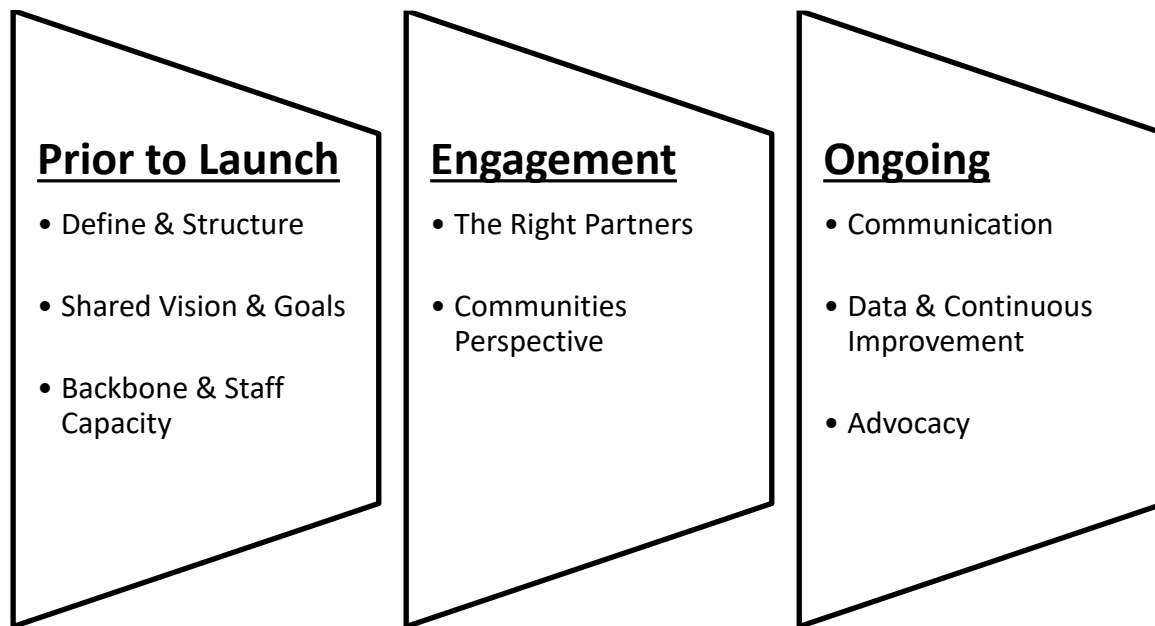
Summary of Themes: Elements of Success.

Eight conditions for successful collective impact emerged through the interview process and data analysis. (1) All members must understand the definition and structure of collective impact. (2) The backbone organization needs sufficient capacity and resources. (3) Individuals from the nonprofit, for-profit, and government should be represented in the collective impact initiative. Selecting the right partners from the beginning improves the likelihood of success. (4) Clear lines of communication should be created to share progress to all parties involved. (5) Community members and individuals from the vulnerable populations being served should be involved and given a voice. (6) All stakeholders should agree on the vision and goals of the initiative. (7) Data and continuous improvement strategies should drive decision-making. (8)

Advocacy and public relations tactics should be utilized to drive engagement, encourage stakeholder support, and increase organizational capacity. Figure 3 describes the significance of each element and Figure 4 is a visual representation of the elements.

Figure 3. Significance of the Elements of Successful Collective Impact

Element	Theme	Significance & Concerns
Define & Structure	Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of a common definition dilutes the potential of collective impact. Differing definitions causes confusion from outside stakeholders. Collective impact is a new term that is unfamiliar to individuals outside of collective impact. To gain support, potential funders and partners need to understand what collective impact is and what gap it was established to fill.
Shared Vision & Goals	Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The purpose of the collaboration and the goals should be shared before each meeting to remind participants of the vision and goals of the organization and each partner's role in achieving the goals. The partner organizations share a clear vision and goals to achieve the mission.
Backbone & Staff Capacity	Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The limited staff capacity leaves gaps. Need for employees with marketing, policy, and development experience.
The Right Partners	Weaknesses; Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The right people are the foundation of a successful collaboration. Quality over quantity. Start small and scale up. Representation from each sector is needed. When partners are held accountable by their peers, the burden is eliminated from the staff. Collective impact brings together multiple organizations across the region and sectors, so obtaining anchors from across disciplines furthers the sense of collaboration.
Community Perspective	Weaknesses; Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The voice of the community should be present to ensure that the representatives from the sectors are not reinforcing norms, but actually making sustainable changes. Community members are valuable resources and offer insights not available to industry professionals.
Communication	Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of communication prevents the sharing of progress to the leaders. Due to this lack of communication, leaders perceive that the organization is not making an impact.
Data & Continuous Improvement	Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use program and outcome data to drive decisions. Continuous improvement exercises teach the partners the techniques of using data to drive decisions and process changes. The model encourages a culture of data use.
Advocacy	Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due to the lack of understanding and clarity of the definition of collective impact and the work being done, the organization needs a marketing professional. Obtain additional partner organizations and funders through advocacy.

Figure 4. Elements of Successful Collective Impact**Implications**

The findings outlined above have implications for many stakeholder groups including practitioners, communities, educators, researchers, and policy makers. This next section describes the implications of the findings for each group of stakeholders.

Practitioners.

Collective impact is messy and can cause disequilibrium for all involved. Complex problems require complex solutions. Collective impact serves as a model or a guide for creating a structure for cross-sector collaboration. While the model simplifies the process, collective impact is not a simple fix. Many of the elements of collective impact are shared with other collaborative approaches to solving complex problems, such as community organizing, coalition building, and partnerships. The organizations and leaders of the initiative shape the outcomes and culture of the initiative. The eight elements of successful collective impact stated above promote awareness for the complexities of collective impact. In addition to the eight elements of successful collective impact initiatives, interview participants provided several key insights,

including anticipating the complexity, being realistic, maintaining documentation, and promoting active participation. These insights are incorporated in the implications for practice for backbone organizations, participants, and convening partners, described below.

Backbone organization.

Due to the fluidity of the model, as described by the study participants, the backbone organization initiating collective impact should start small and scale up. Changes are easier to make with a small group of organizational partners. For example, if a collective impact organization hopes to create three networks, each focused on a different part of solving a problem, only one network should be launched at a time. The lessons learned from managing one network can then be applied to the launch of the following networks.

Documentation is an important part of establishing a collective impact initiative. In addition to understanding collective impact and the goals of the initiative, participants need to understand their role. The backbone organization can create role descriptions for each level of volunteer position (e.g., staff, Leadership Council members, and collaborative action network members). The backbone staff should solicit insights from the network volunteers and council members to create realistic descriptions. The expectations should be communicated during meetings and frequently reinforced. The convening partners of the network can take responsibility for reiterating the roles and expectations for volunteers.

Participants.

Collective impact is not a silver bullet for large-scale social problems. It is essential for participants to understand the complexity of the model and the breadth of the problem. Change takes time; therefore leaders must exercise patience. To maintain engagement and prevent partners from leaving the initiative, individuals should be reminded of the goals and expectations

frequently, for example, at the beginning of each meeting. Constant reminders of the definition of collective impact and the plan for creating change will bolster confidence and build trust. Implementing policy changes and altering large systems, such as what data is collected across school districts, is a challenge. Partners must have the same vision and see the short-term goals accomplished to remain engaged.

Convening partners.

The convening partners of the CANs lead the monthly network meetings and manage the participants. The convening partners can take responsibility for communicating the goals and visions of the collaboration and create realistic expectations for the timeline of the initiative. When participants understand where the initiative is going, individuals are more likely to remain motivated and engaged in the process.

Several of the identified subjects from the CAN declined to participate in the interview, citing they were not familiar enough with the organization or they had not yet attended a meeting. One potential interviewee misnamed the group in which they served. These examples demonstrate the lack of clarity experienced by some collective impact members. The roles and expectations need to be reinforced to increase active participation. The partners attending meetings should be actively engaged in the discussion and decision-making.

Communities.

Communities are an important aspect of collective impact. Community members should be engaged by the backbone or convening leader of the CAN throughout the collective impact process. By definition, the collective impact framework is a top-down approach. Leaders and executives from each sector are coming together to make decisions for vulnerable populations. In order for the changes to be sustainable, communities should play an active role. For example,

community members can join one of the CANs, join the Leadership Council, or stay up-to-date on reports published on the website of an initiative.

Educators.

Collaboration is becoming increasingly popular and expected from funders, donors, and government agencies. Leaders across sectors are looking to collaboration as a solution for persistent social problems. The process, strategies, and best practices of collaboration should be available to individuals in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors in the form of professional development. To prepare leaders and future leaders to organize collective impact initiatives, higher education curricula in related fields should cover cross-sector collaboration, facilitative leadership, and continuous improvement techniques, as well as characteristics of other cross-sector collaborative efforts, such as coalition building, community organizing, and community building.

Facilitative leadership and continuous improvement are important subjects for individuals in the field. Facilitative leadership skills are needed to lead networks of individuals from different sectors. An individual in the convening role should utilize facilitative leadership to advance the group priorities and engage participants. Continuous improvement is used to track progress and evaluate processes. Program evaluation and data analysis are specialized skills. Individuals interested in implementing collective impact need to have expertise in continuous improvement.

Policy Makers.

Policy makers should be aware of the collective impact initiatives in the region. Collective impact leaders become experts on the issue of the initiative and collect and analyze data to help further understand large-scale social issues. To address systemic change, policy

makers should be participating in collective impact work. Collective impact convenes leaders from each sector, so by definition, government entities should be engaged. Policy makers should take the initiative to approach collective impact leaders to understand the issues and offer political expertise to advance the mission of the organization. Policy makers can use their professional experience and participation in the collective impact initiative to create effective policy solutions. For example, policy makers involved with the Connect Group could create policy solutions for education reform based on data gathered from the schools participating in the collaboration.

Conclusion

Collective impact is not the only solution to approach social issues such as eliminating poverty, improving the education system, or feeding the hungry. However, collective impact offers a framework to address large-scale systemic issues. Collective impact convenes leaders and focuses their attention on addressing issues facing a community. The themes and sub-themes identified in this study provide practitioners with insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the model. If practitioners are aware of the weaknesses prior to launch, adjustments can be made to ensure effectiveness. The eight elements of successful collective impact provide a guide for launching a collective impact initiative.

Collective impact initiatives are coalitions of individuals with egos, biases, diverse experience, and personalities. Remaining focused on the goal of the initiative and making sure everyone understands his or her role is crucial to success. Providing clarity and a shared sense of commitment will help to eliminate confusion and disengagement.

It is evident from the interviews that the Connect Group is making progress and making tangible changes within the education system, such as sharing data and agreeing on literacy

goals. Leveraging the strengths of leaders across sectors and convening around one goal has the potential to create a positive impact in the community. While there are improvements to be made, collective impact is working to tackle large-scale social issues in this community. If attention is given to the eight elements of success and themes identified from this project, collective impact may have the potential to address systems-level change.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions [IRB Project Number: URIRB170112]

Purpose

1. Please describe your role as it relates to the collective impact organization?
2. What is your definition/interpretation of collective impact?
3. Why is there a need for collective impact? What gap is collective impact filling and why was the collective impact model selected to fill that gap?

Structure

4. What is working and what isn't working with the current structure of the organization (Leadership Council, resource and steering committee, backbone staff, and collaborative action networks) and as it relates to the specific group in which you serve (Leadership Council, resource and steering committee, backbone staff, or collaborative action network)?
5. If you could rebuild the structure of the collective impact organization or the structure of the group in which you serve, how would you build it and why?
6. In your experience, how is the current delegation of duties working?
7. How do you measure success and monitor effectiveness?

Strengths

8. What positive outcomes have you seen due to collective impact?
9. What are the top three strengths of collective impact?
10. In what ways is collective impact creating systems-level/systemic change?

Weaknesses

11. What are the top three threats or obstacles to success?

12. What improvements need to be made to the current model?

13. Have you experienced any interpersonal challenges?

Growth

14. What are the top three growth opportunities that you see for the collective impact organization?

15. What would increase the effectiveness of this initiative or help move your project forward?

Learning

16. What do you know now that you wish you would have known prior to launching collective impact?

17. What advice would you give to people starting collective impact?

18. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience related to collective impact?