Corridors of College Success Series

Collective Impact:
Theory Versus Reality

By Melinda Mechur Karp and Valerie Lundy-Wagner

Collective impact is an increasingly popular approach to addressing persistent social problems. It takes a place-based systems approach to social change and compared with other forms of collaboration is meant to be more structured and strategic. Such an approach is intuitively appealing, and it has the support of stakeholders at the local level, the state level, and even the White House.[1] However, engaging in strategic, cross-sector collaboration is challenging. This brief draws on the experiences of five committed collective impact communities participating in the Ford Foundation's Corridors to College Success initiative to expose some of the practical challenges of translating the theory of collective impact into action.[2]

Despite its popularity, collective impact has no standard definition. Various experts, proponents of collective impact, and strategic assistance organizations describe it by providing slight variations on the notion of "systems change"—shifting how entire communities allocate resources, craft policy, and approach supporting their citizens. Though they generally emphasize cross-sector vision and goal setting, criteria for action, and shared governance and accountability, their models for collective impact vary. For example, the Collective Impact Forum characterizes the work by five conditions,[3] whereas StriveTogether outlines four principles for successful collective impact.[4]

The various models provide little insight into how the approach plays out as communities try to put it into action.[5] Further, while education is a general focus of many collective impact initiatives, there is scant literature on initiatives that centrally involve postsecondary institutions, as the Corridors of College Success initiative does.[6]

Qualitative research conducted by CCRC suggests that Corridors stakeholders believe that a new approach—such as collective impact—is needed to address low postsecondary educational attainment among socioeconomically vulnerable young people. But our research has also uncovered challenges that make a collective impact approach difficult to execute, despite the willingness of organizations and communities to engage in these efforts. This brief highlights those challenges and in doing so provides a lens for understanding why well-intentioned collective impact efforts may not take root.

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Importantly, those we spoke with were involved in myriad collective impact initiatives—not just the Corridors project. In total, our data represent eight different initiatives. Thus, the opinions expressed by our interviewees reflect their experiences with collective work broadly, not just in relation to a specific project.

Challenge #1: Developing a Shared Understanding of Collective Impact Work

Nearly all Corridors informants with whom we spoke were familiar with collective impact and understood that it was a way to coordinate work across organizations toward a common goal. But they defined its core components differently, used different terminology, or defined key concepts such as "collaboration" in different ways.

To some extent, this variation was related to stakeholders' level of experience with collective impact. In general, stakeholders new to the concept viewed collective impact in many ways: as a common vision, or asset mapping, or consensus building. These new stakeholders tended to focus on the types of activities that occur when a community engages in collective work, rather than an overarching theory of action or specific end goal.

However, even in communities where collective impact work had been underway for multiple years, partners had differing definitions and conceptions of what collective impact entailed. One study participant noted that within his community, stakeholders struggled to differentiate between "active collaboration" (i.e., small groups of organizations working closely together on a specific project or projects) and "really aligning" systems to meet common goals, which requires a larger realignment of organizations and activities throughout the organizational ecosystem.

Across communities, words such as "collaboration," "alignment," "communication," and "common vision" were often associated with collective impact—but how individuals defined these terms and envisioned what they meant in practice varied. Thus, partners often thought they were working together when they were actually working at cross-purposes—using the same word to refer to different things. This led to misunderstanding, frustration, and stalled efforts.

Conceptions of how to approach collective impact work varied within communities as well. For example, in some communities, there was confusion as to whether collective impact is a top-down process (driven by large, influential organizations or high-level leaders) or a bottom-up process (driven by smaller organizations or "regular" community leaders). Although in theory such differences should allow stakeholders to weigh different perspectives of the work, the reality is that these differences frequently contributed to a mismatch in expectations around decision-making, how to approach the work, and who should lead collective efforts.

Challenge #2: Maintaining Organizational Competencies in a Coordinated System

Collective impact requires organizations to engage in a new type of relationship, one that goes beyond goodwill or cross-organizational knowledge and requires stakeholders to prioritize common goals and strategic, aligned missions and activities. In this framework, it is insufficient to merely know other players in the community. Instead, organizations need to leverage their relationships to jointly work toward cross-organizational outcomes. Many Corridors stakeholders we spoke to agreed with this in principle, noting that such coordinated relationships likely improve the functioning of the system.

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However, shifting to this type of strategic, inter-organizational relationship presents challenges for individual organizations, including those involved in the Corridors initiative. Most critically, Corridors organizations struggled to align shared or community-wide missions and goals with their own organizational missions and core

competencies. Our informants also cautioned that narrowing organizational service areas and target populations to fit a place-based strategy (as is often required to target and focus collective impact efforts) may have unintended consequences. For example, narrowing an organization's geographic emphasis may make it more challenging to access services for students who may live in one neighborhood, attend school in another, and receive support services in yet another area.

Many of those we spoke with indicated (or implied) that forcing new relationship configurations resulted in "too many [organizational] compromises." For example, in all Corridors communities, leaders recognized that college readiness supports in high schools, colleges, and community-based organizations (CBOs) often overlapped; as one informant stated, "a lot of students involved with one CBO are involved with multiple CBOs . . . so they get a triple dose, and then some students don't get anything." Yet increasing efficiency in this area would almost inevitably require some organizations to modify service areas, content, or provision to accommodate the collective's goals. These types of compromises, though necessary to achieve community goals, may have negative consequences for individual organizations. Thus, though Corridors stakeholders may have agreed with collective impact goals in principle, organizational leaders were understandably reluctant to dilute or shift their organizational mission; this reluctance made it harder for the community to accomplish its collective goals.

Second, it is important to recognize how funding constraints influence organizations' ability to leverage relationships for collective impact.[7] In the Corridors communities, the expansion in mission required to align organization-specific and community goals was not usually supported by organizations' funding structures. Organizations needed to continue their programmatic work in order to maintain their mission and mission-driven funding, and just performing this work was a challenge. One informant explained, "You're often talking about organizations who are already stretched." Dedicating staff to coordinate collective efforts strained organizational workloads or stretched organizational budgets, and yet without such staff, collective work was stymied.

Finally, the challenge of mission alignment was exacerbated by the multiplicity of cross-organizational efforts in each community. Stakeholders acknowledged that adjusting organizational priorities to participate in multiple collective impact initiatives "dilutes efforts and makes [organizations] crazy." Oftentimes, key decision-makers were sitting at multiple tables related to the same topic with considerable overlap; we heard that such overlap was "confusing." Informants from multiple Corridors communities mentioned that there was no one person responsible for articulating how related initiatives were (or were not) congruent, obscuring collective and individual organizational work plans. One informant matter-of-factly stated that "it is a challenge to engage meaningfully in multiple efforts."

Challenge #3: Using Data to Support Collective Impact Work

Data is often a focal point in collective impact efforts, as it can serve as a rallying point for partners to identify challenges and successes, establish shared understanding, and develop consensus. Despite the importance of data and the potentially powerful role it can play in supporting collective work, our informants described myriad challenges associated with their organizations' capacity for data collection, data-sharing agreements, third-party data warehousing or merging, data privacy and storage, and staff capacity for meeting technical data management and analytic needs.

Organizations in each Corridors community had varying levels of data infrastructure. Some partners had robust systems, but they often experienced difficulty engaging in candid discussions about data infrastructure that supported the cross-sector collaboration rather than their own organizations' work. Other organizations had little experience analyzing data, or little capacity to develop data collection and analysis systems.

Most stakeholders understood the importance of data. However, they expressed frustration in the gap between ideal data use and what they could realistically accomplish. Organizations faced capacity constraints in developing a data infrastructure strategy and then hiring the necessary personnel to support continuous improvement. One

informant explained that "there is a need for funders to be sensitive to helping organizations . . . build internal capacity to use data effectively in terms of both hardware and internal systems basics, as well as ability to have staffing dedicated to data." Another said, "Asking folks to create data systems is basically asking people to create a subsidiary of themselves"—a new entity within the organization with discrete goals that often requires staff with new skill sets. This concern echoes those noted above regarding the challenges of mission expansion.

Beyond these challenges, a fundamental unanswered question around data that we heard was, "What does data sharing look like" in a collective system? Stakeholders held different ideas about how data should be shared, when, and to what end. While data is considered an important element for collective impact decision-making, Corridors leaders and partners faced both conceptual and practical challenges.

The Reality: (Dis)incentives for Collective Impact

The challenges described above do not mean that stakeholders do not believe in collective impact. Our findings indicate that they do—and that they see a variety of incentives to try to make the model work. First, participants across all communities discussed benefits of collective impact in terms of the greater societal good. One informant explained that in theory, by combining resources, organizations with similar goals could maximize their capacity to reach students through coordination of services.

Second, they understood the potential for collective impact to maximize operational efficiencies, which was particularly important as communities were trying to recover from the Great Recession. Corridors funding also exposed communities to supplemental resources they may not have otherwise had access to. One informant enthusiastically "told [the] leadership team we're getting resources from intermediaries"—expertise built into the Corridors initiative and accessed at no cost to local partners or the backbone organization.[8]

However, these incentives were largely intangible or short-lived. Respondents repeatedly told us that they spend most of their time focused on delivering the core services provided by their organizations and ensuring organizational sustainability for their clients and staff. In other words, stakeholders wanted to do good via collective impact but were hampered by the day-to-day reality of sustaining an organization. The immediate and tangible disincentives for focusing on collective impact work, such as the competing need to secure funding and maintain the organizational mission, often outweighed the loftier but less concrete incentives for collective impact.

Our findings indicate that incentives and disincentives, particularly around funding, are misaligned. Two informants suggested that there is a "need to create incentives so that leaders behave differently." In absence of more concrete incentives, collective impact efforts run the risk of being subsumed by the everyday responsibilities of organizational stakeholders.

Conclusion

While the extant literature provides an important baseline for conceptualizing collective impact, the reality on the ground is more complicated. Key principles of the collective impact approach, including the use of data and the alignment of organizational goals, conflict with the reality of running and sustaining an organization. Though not insurmountable, these conflicts between what is ideal and what is practical or expedient can be challenging to address for even the most committed stakeholders.

Collective impact strives to fundamentally shift how organizations work and thereby requires time to overcome definitional issues in addition to resource, capacity, and other constraints. It also may require a rethinking of the incentives for collective work in order to ensure that they are not outweighed by the more tangible disincentives and barriers faced by organizational participants. Intangible benefits alone may be insufficient to drive collective impact work. Recognizing the disincentives may help communities identify ways to overcome these barriers in order to successfully engage in collective impact strategies in their communities.

Endnotes

1. Jolin, Schmitz, & Seldon (2012).

2. For more information about collective impact, the Corridors of College Success initiative, and the research upon which this brief is based, see the introduction to this series of briefs (Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2015).

3. According to the Collective Impact Forum, the five conditions of collective impact include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

4. StriveTogether's (n.d.) four principles for collective impact are shared community vision, evidence-based decision making, collaborative action, and investment and sustainability.

5. There are an increasing number of case studies on collective impact efforts, and many of them note challenges to the work, but most tend to focus more on specific points of success and less on the oftentimes long and tedious process leading to success.

6. One exception is the work being done by the State University of New York, as described in a recent volume edited by Jason Lane (2015).

7. A forthcoming brief in this series by Melinda Mechur Karp and Olga Rodríguez will provide more information on funding collective impact work.

8. For information on the Corridors project and the strategic assistance provided to sites, see the introduction to this series (Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2015).

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