Corridors of College Success Series

Postsecondary Partnerships in Collective Impact

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As previous briefs in the Corridors of College Success Series have described, collective impact is a collaborative, place-based model for addressing common social problems (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2015, 2016). Place-based efforts to provide wide-ranging social services date back to the settlement house movement beginning in the late 19th century (Henig, Rebell, & Wolff, 2015). However, one of the defining elements of collective impact that differentiates it from previous forms of place-based collaboration is its approach to partnership formation. The collective impact model is based on the premise that meaningful collaboration requires the development of a comprehensive multi-sector partnership that brings together organizations from key sectors within a community, such as government agencies, foundations, community-based organizations, K-12 school systems, postsecondary institutions, and employers.

Importantly, beyond merely including organizations from multiple sectors, the collective impact model compels organizational partners to actively change the way that they operate in order to align their missions and develop a shared vision, with the goal of filling service gaps and eliminating redundant services (Gold, 2013; Kania & Kramer, 2011).[1] This approach contrasts sharply with the traditional binary partnership model, which involves organizations from only two different sectors that come together for a specific purpose and that do not typically engage in strong mission alignment. An organization may have multiple partnerships with organizations from each of the sectors mentioned above, but if each partnership operates independently as a standalone effort without much consideration of connections to other efforts or stakeholders, then the organization would not be considered to be engaging in collective impact.

Because collective impact work cannot be carried out effectively without the foundation of a strong multi-sector partnership, it is crucial to understand whether communities attempting to engage in collective impact are able to develop one, and what factors facilitate or hinder this type of partnership formation. In this brief, I help to answer this question by examining how postsecondary institutions have attempted to develop multi-sector partnerships within a collective impact context, using data from a study of the Ford Corridors of College Success initiative ("Corridors").[2] The goal of this initiative is to increase the attainment of

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postsecondary education credentials that lead to high-quality careers among students from underserved populations by creating more student-supported and seamlessly connected education-to-career pathways. Because two-year public colleges enroll so many low-income and first-generation students, this initiative focuses on community colleges as a locus of engagement. Corridors thus requires that each of its five sites include an anchor community college.

Binary Partnerships

The two-year and four-year college sectors both play a leading role in connecting the K-12 education sector with the workforce sector and are thus vital participants in shaping and strengthening critically important education-to-career pathways. Community colleges, in particular, have a long history of engaging in direct efforts to partner with other educational institutions and with regional employers. For example, dual enrollment programs connect high schools and colleges, transfer and articulation agreements connect two- and four-year colleges, and career and technical training programs connect colleges and the local labor market (deCastro & Karp, 2008). Yet because these efforts typically utilize binary partnerships,[3] they often unfold unsystematically and fail to boost collaboration and efficiency across various partners.

The community colleges in our sample were primarily engaged in traditional binary partnerships, even though all five colleges were engaged in both the Corridors project and at least one other initiative designed to take a multi-sector approach.[4] Table 1 summarizes the main types of binary partnerships observed across the Corridors colleges. These partnerships are typical of those that community colleges often engage in (deCastro & Karp, 2008).

Although many of the binary partnerships were quite robust, these seemingly straightforward relationships often faced significant challenges. While colleges were extremely active in developing and supporting partnerships to strengthen education-to-career pathways, my colleagues and I found that the binary partnership model resulted in a highly fragmented approach to student success. Among the Corridors sites, specific challenges associated with binary partnerships included:

Lack of coordination among organizations from the same sector. This was most apparent among community-based organizations. Although the colleges had partnerships with multiple community-based organizations, those organizations rarely worked together to compare service offerings or target populations. As a result, some students were receiving extensive support while others were largely disconnected from any assistance. Thus, even though these partnerships were providing critical services, they were only doing so for particular subsets of students at particular points in time.

Encouragement of competition rather than collaboration within and among colleges. This was particularly true for business and industry partnerships. College staff noted that most employers are willing to engage in only a limited number of postsecondary partnerships. However, employer outreach typically came from individual college departments or faculty members rather than the institution as a whole, resulting in multiple requests being made of employers. This lack of coordination led to competition both internally among departments and externally with other colleges seeking to work with the same employers. College staff expressed frustration with this uncoordinated approach, fearing that it was resulting in wasted effort and lost opportunities.

Table 1. Binary Partnerships at Corridors Colleges	
Partnering Sector	**Partnership Activities**
Public school system	Dual enrollment initiatives
Four-year colleges	Articulation agreements
Community-based organizations	College readiness, access, and success initiatives
Business and industry	Curriculum development, internships
Government agencies and foundations	Grant-funded programs

Conflicting goals. When organizational partners do not share an aligned mission, education and employment can become competing goals. For example, even though the stability of government grants for job preparation appeared to foster long-term partnerships between community colleges and career centers and workforce boards, college staff indicated that the emphasis on job placement in the grant requirements often forced students to prioritize work over school.

Partnership silos. Perhaps the most significant challenge resulting from the binary partnership model was the extent to which each type of partnership was operating as a functional silo. Without coordination across multiple sectors, numerous opportunities were lost in providing valuable support to strengthen education-to-career pathways. Dual enrollment programs were helping prepare students academically for college, but they were not connected to community-based organizations helping students apply for college admission and financial aid. College access programs were helping students get into college, but they were not connected to mentoring programs designed to help students succeed in college. Articulation agreements were making it easier for students to transfer from two-year to four-year colleges, but because the agreements were focused primarily on the relationship between the two- and four-year sectors rather than on education-to-career pathways as a whole, the programs of study were not always aligned with labor market needs.

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The challenges associated with binary partnerships highlight the need for a different approach to postsecondary partnerships, and they provide a rationale for considering a multi-sector approach. The colleges in our study did not lack partnerships; rather, they lacked coherence among their partnerships, which a multi-sector approach should help to facilitate. Ideally, postsecondary involvement in a multi-sector collective impact partnership, with a community college as the anchor institution, would strengthen pathways both into and through college to employment or further education by better aligning curricula and programs of study across education sectors and into the labor market, and by better coordinating services in order to provide wraparound supports for students.

Multi-sector Partnerships

Stakeholders across all five sites acknowledged the need for more collaborative approaches for addressing persistent social problems, and they viewed collective impact-driven multi-sector partnerships as a potentially powerful strategy for doing so (Karp & Lundy-Wagner, 2016). As mentioned, in addition to the Corridors initiative, all five of the colleges are also involved in at least one other postsecondary initiative that was designed to be conducted as a multi-sector partnership. Despite this fact, our research found that most initiatives were struggling to carry out the complex types of coordinated multi-sector tasks they were intended to facilitate. We identified three main challenges preventing colleges from becoming meaningfully engaged in multi-sector partnerships:

Tendency to narrow the mission focus. Given community colleges' long history of binary partnerships, it is not surprising that colleges tended to find themselves returning to a more familiar mode of operating when confronted with the complex task of engaging in a multi-sector partnership. For example, two community colleges attempting to expand dual enrollment programs into a true multi-sector partnership in close collaboration with high schools, four-year colleges, and employers were essentially reverting to a singular focus on the high schools. Ideally, earning college credit while enrolled in high school would facilitate college enrollment and provide marketable career training. However, we found that neither program had yet to successfully link high school to college and employment. One program was developed to increase employment rates for young people by creating a more seamless pathway between dual enrollment in high school, college programming, and the labor market in specific STEM fields. The

other was intended to increase college and labor market access for students who had dropped out of high school by offering dual enrollment courses and technical training in conjunction with GED preparation. In both cases we found that the colleges were primarily focused on offering dual enrollment courses to students while they were enrolled in high school or the GED program, rather than on building connections to the college for students after high school/GED completion. This mostly precluded the programs from facilitating college preparation for the labor market for these students.

Tendency to overlook the college's role. When the main impetus for a multi-sector partnership did not stem directly from the college, partners often made assumptions about the college's role without involving the college, or relegated the college's role to the sidelines. Such was the case in one of the Corridors sites where the public school system received a large federal grant to improve education-to-career pathways by promoting partnerships between school districts, colleges, and employers. The school system was using the grant to focus on three areas: career exposure in middle school, job shadowing and internships in high school, and the development of high-growth STEM pathways through colleges. However, although the anchor college for the Corridors project was solicited as a partner for the grant, they were not included in the development of the pathways. The public school system conducted extensive research to identify pathways that would fill crucial labor market gaps and to identify high schools that lacked access to high-quality STEM programs. But because they were mainly focused on what the pathways would look like in high school, they did not coordinate with the college to determine how the pathways aligned with college programming.

Tendency to focus on internal college programming. While overlooking the college's role emerged as a challenge for initiatives in which the college itself was not the primary focus, the opposite problem appeared to be occurring when the college was the primary focus and main driver of the partnership. For example, reform efforts at one of the colleges were at the center of a multi-sector partnership dedicated to improving college access and promoting the completion of certificates and degrees leading to jobs with family-sustaining wages. The college reforms consisted of two main components designed to streamline the connection between education and career: the organization of academic departments into broader subject-area pathways based on related careers, and the incorporation of workforce competencies into academic programming. In order to foster the development of close ties with business and industry, the partnership was structured as a non-profit housed within the city chamber of commerce. However, interview participants from several organizations and sectors indicated that the initiative was primarily seen as a college effort. Although other partners were consulted, they did not appear to have been deeply involved in any of the decision making.

Conclusion

The anchor community colleges participating in Corridors are clearly engaged in multiple efforts with multiple partners to promote student success, but by and large these efforts are happening through binary partnerships. These partnerships create pockets of robust service provision within the colleges, and they strengthen connections between the colleges and individual sectors, such as high schools and employers. And yet, there are still unaddressed obstacles that hinder student progression into and through a seamless education-to-career pathway. Collective impact initiatives based around multi-sector partnerships are trying to change this dynamic, but in many cases they have not yet been able to articulate actionable plans for doing so.

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As other researchers have noted, balancing the needs of an individual organization with the collective interest in order to establish and maintain any type of partnership can be challenging (Amey, Eddy, & Campbell, 2010; Henig, Riehl,

Rebell, & Wolff, 2015). Given that multi-sector partnerships require integrating the goals and actions of highly differentiated organizations, it is not unexpected that they would be even more challenging to establish than binary partnerships. Ideally, collective impact should provide a framework that enables the development of multi-sector partnerships. Yet, the fact that Corridors partners are finding it difficult to build multi-sector partnerships even within the context of collective impact is telling. If it is difficult to achieve these partnerships with the support of the collective impact model and a growing network of collective impact advocates, it is likely to be even more so without these catalysts. As the challenges experienced by the Corridors colleges demonstrate, it can be all too easy for multi-sector partnerships to fall back into established ways of operating as binary partnerships or to allow the interests and needs of a single partner to dominate a group effort.

Multi-sector partnerships are not impossible to create. Community colleges are particularly well-positioned to develop and engage in them given the numerous organizations with which they routinely partner (Amey, Eddy, & Ozaki, 2007). Moreover, colleges are already working with many of the key entities that are central to the strengthening of education-to-career pathways. The challenge is to strategically organize and connect those partners. Such alignment is no small task. Empowering postsecondary institutions to transform binary partnerships into meaningful multi-sector partnerships will require greater attention to their capacity for building and nurturing relationships, regardless of whether or not collective impact is the impetus for doing so.

Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this study, I define a multi-sector partnership as a partnership between four or more sectors formed with the intention of collaborating around a shared mission as indicated by the stated goals of the partnership.

2. In the study, my colleagues and I conducted interviews with 108 stakeholders, carried out additional focus groups and observations with stakeholders, and collected relevant documents at the five Corridors sites between July 2014 and February 2015. See Karp and Lundy-Wagner (2015).

3. There are exceptions. The State University of New York (SUNY) Cradle to Career Alliance (https://www.suny.edu/cradletocareer/) is an example of a collective impact effort driven by the two- and four-year college sectors which has developed comprehensive networks of multi-sector partners across the state of New York.

4. When we gathered our data, three of the five Corridors sites were engaged in the planning phase of collective impact initiatives involving multi-sector partnerships, while the other two were actively implementing initiatives involving such partnerships. For the purposes of this brief, we treat initiatives in the early stages of creating partnerships the same as those with more developed partnerships. Future studies may wish to explore the evolution of multi-sector partnerships over time.

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