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Community Collaborations

"Collaborations empower. They join single voices into a chorus that can be strong enough to effect change."

The National Assembly of National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations (1997).

author
Bernadette Sangalang
University of California
Davis, California

editor
Ramona Carlos

In today's generation of program development for youth and families, there is much discussion about and advocacy for collaboration between service providers. During the past decade, enthusiasm for community-based collaborations has surged. (McHale & Lerner, 1996; Rogers, Berrick, & Barth, 1996; The National Assembly, 1997). Such enthusiasm has come from foundations, local, state, and federal governments, private and public agencies, and communities throughout, and is largely due to the recognition of community collaborations providing a more comprehensive, holistic approach to changing the systems delivering services to children and their families (Rogers, et. al., 1996; Jones, 1992; White & Wehlage, 1995; Lerner, 1995).

Our systems of delivering services to children and families in the community have mostly been fragmented and poorly coordinated (Melaville, 1991; Lerner, 1995; Morrill, 1992; Capper, 1994). The human service delivery systems involve an array of separate agencies that provide support such as education, health, and social services for children and families. However, each of these systems addresses different needs and serves different groups of children and families through a variety of programs (Morrill, 1992). For instance, the education system provides primarily instructional services to children and adults in schools. The health services include medical, nutrition, and mental health services. The social services provide a variety of support including child welfare, counseling, income maintenance, housing, and job training. Proponents of collaborative efforts conclude that these separate systems have often been found to be ineffective in serving children and families with multiple and complex needs.

Collaborative efforts and interagency partnerships is one strategy that is being utilized by many communities to redesign a better and efficient system for developing programs for youth and families. Collaboration is the process by which several agencies, organizations, and individuals make a formal, long-term commitment to work together toward a desired outcome related to critical and complex social issues of wide concern (The National Assembly, 1997). It requires a responsibility among the mem-

bers to share decision-making and allocation of resources toward a mutually agreed upon desired outcome. Effective collaborations create flexible working environments where power is shared, each person is challenged to do their best, and all are involved in the process of improving the outcome, the service and the community condition (Hogue, 1993).

Collaborative Community Initiatives

Government funding for services to children and families has decreased over the years and cannot keep pace with the increasing and complex needs in our society. Consequently, it is becoming necessary that agencies and organizations in the community that serve to promote the well-being of children and families find ways to collaborate to use their resources more efficiently and effectively (White and Wehlage, 1995). Over the past decade, there has been a growth of community initiatives designed to encourage the creation of collaborations to provide services for children and families. Collaborative community initiatives can develop the capacity to reconfigure available resources and to create more effective and more widely accessible prevention, treatment, and support services (Melaville, 1991; Capper, 1994). Especially in communities that increasingly face complex problems and a scarcity of resources to solve them, collaborations have become an essential tool for public and private organizations to enhance and coordinate services in their communities.

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The CYFAR Initiative

An example of a community initiative with an emphasis on collaborative efforts is the Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (CYFAR) Initiative of the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture. The mission of the CYFAR National Initiative is to marshal resources of the land grant and Cooperative Extension System to collaborate with other organizations to develop and deliver educational programs to youth and families who are at risk of not having their basic human needs met. It is a goal of the CYFAR Initiative that these programs provide a means for participating families to lead positive, productive, contributing lives. Research-based, key components for effective programming of the CYFAR Initiative include the following: exemplifying a community-based, holistic philosophy; promoting partnerships with individuals in their communities; addressing complex conditions; soliciting and valuing diversity; instilling collaboration; and combining a coherent spectrum of services. An important objective of the CYFAR Initiative is collaboration among Cooperative Extension, county-based personnel, land grant university departments, businesses and other private sector partners, and youth and family organizations. Cooperative Extension serves as a catalyst and vital contributor for developing and maintaining collaborations for children, youth and families. The CYFAR Initiative encourages Cooperative Extension 4-H youth development staff and home economists to bring to collaborations their experience with recruiting, training, and partnering with volunteers to expand delivery of Extension education programs. By establishing collaborations in the community, all agencies can make efficient use of human and financial resources and create higher quality, more comprehensive, and more effective programs. The CYFAR Initiative asserts that working collaboratively across geographic, discipline, and political lines is resulting in stronger programs, more efficient use of resources, and clearer public perspective and appreciation of the educational programs of the Cooperative Extension System. (U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1999)

CYFAR programs respond to the needs of children, youth and families through a variety of strategies, including: afterschool and enrichment programs, child care, parent education, parenting skills trainings, computer labs, and mentoring. The following story illustrates an example of a CYFAR project in New York:

> "A former teacher's aid with the public school system established a library in her small home in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the state. Neighborhood children are invited to the "library" afterschool for educational games, reading and some "plain talk" with the bright and caring former teacher's aid. When the local newspaper wrote an article highlighting the library, the Extension office responded immediately by establishing a partnership with the afterschool program. A CYFAR computer and support for the afterschool program were provided through the local Extension office and the CYFAR program in the state. The small "library" program has now expanded into a local elementary school as a 4-day per week afterschool program. College students, police officers, church members, and other community volunteers give their time and talents to the 30-40 youth participants developing skill in crafts, poetry, writing, and other literacy activities. Extension staff sit on the Advisory Committee of the "library" and the process to institutionalize the program as a not-for-profit organization is currently underway." (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1998)

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers

Another innovative collaborative community initiative is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLC) program from the United States Department of Education. The CLC program was established by Congress to award grants to rural and inner-city public schools, or consortia of such schools, to enable them to plan, implement, or expand projects that benefit the educational, health, social services, cultural and recreational needs of the community. School-based learning centers can provide safe, drug-free, supervised and cost-effective afterschool, weekend or summer havens for children, youth and their families. The authorizing legislation states that schools "should collaborate with other public and nonprofit agencies and organizations, local businesses, educational entities (such as vocational and adult education programs, school-to-work programs, community colleges, and universities), recreational, cultural, and other community and human service entities, for the purpose of meeting the needs of, and expanding the opportunities available to, the residents of the communities served by such schools." By statute, the CLC programs must include collaborative efforts to be undertaken by community-based organizations, related public agencies, businesses, or other appropriate organizations. The program is designed to target funds to high-need rural and urban communities that have low achieving students and high rates of juvenile crime, school violence, and student drug abuse, but lack the resources to establish after-school centers. (U.S. Department of Education, 1998)

An example of a 21st Century Community Learning Center program in California engages about 500 students afterschool daily in tutoring, mentoring, homework support, academic and cultural enrichment, ethnic dance, art, computers, sports, telecommunications and accessing the city library. Parents and community members benefit from evening classes on parenting, technology, career/job skills, ESL and adult literacy. Anticipated outcomes include improved homework completion, higher student grade point averages and academic achievement, increased family involvement in schools and measurable reductions in

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youth crime, violence and high-risk behavior. Community partners include youth development programs, the county Office of Education, Cooperative Extension, religious organizations, Department of Parks and Recreation, and other local agencies. (U. S. Department of Education, 1998)

The above mentioned collaborative community initiatives are not presented as models of success, but rather as examples of national collaborative efforts that have emerged in the past decade. Valuable lessons can be learned from each of the community initiatives. As Melaville (1991) points out, "by coordinating services, eliminating any overlaps and documenting gaps in essential services, well-publicized interagency initiatives can strengthen the case for expanded public and private investments."

Building Collaborations in the Community

Building a collaboration is not an easy task. It requires each member to look beyond their individual agendas and agree to pool resources, meet a shared vision, and jointly plan and provide new services. Members of a collaboration form their group for unique reasons. Sometimes collaborations form when members of organizations begin to realize the need to improve coordination of services among themselves. Sometimes a catalytic event in the community can bring about the beginning of a collaboration. Another reason can be the organizations' thoughts on how they can better serve the needs of the community. Each community is unique and the process of building community collaborations vary from community to community. It is unrealistic to expect one style of collaboration to be effective in all circumstances (Borden, Hogue, & Perkins, 1998). However, some essential issues need to be considered when building a collaboration:

"By coordinating services, eliminating any overlaps and documenting gaps in essential services, well-publicized interagency initiatives can strengthen the case for expanded public and private investments."

Focus of the Collaboration. When a collaboration is starting to be formed, careful thought should be given to the focus of the collaboration. Focus may be on a particular problem (drugs, homelessness, or lack of afterschool child care), or around organizational issues (the requirement from funders for a joint funding proposal, or the need to coordinate services) (The National Assembly, 1997). Agreement among the group on a focus provides the basis for developing the shared vision, purpose and goals of the collaboration.

Formalize Outcomes. A clearly defined outcome is essential when building a successful collaboration. Developing desired outcomes of the collaboration provides the opportunity to line up a range of activities for a common purpose (Borden, et. al., 1998). The outcomes, which represent the desired conditional change, should be measurable, achievable, and consistent with the collaboration's goal.

Research the Community. When forming the collaboration, a thorough assessment related to the purpose of the group can be conducted to gain a sense of the community. Understanding the community, including its people, cultures, values, habits, and assets is essential in providing the foundation for effective collaboration (National Network for Collaboration, 1996).

One strategy that can be used to assess the community's strengths and resources is community asset mapping. The purpose of community asset mapping is to locate all of the available local assets in the community and to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Each community has their own unique combination of assets. A thorough map of those assets would include an inventory of the gifts, skills, and capacity of the community's residents, citizens' associations such as churches and cultural groups, and local institutions such as schools, hospitals, businesses and parks

(Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). According to the proponents of this strategy, in a community whose assets are being fully recognized and mobilized, the entire community will be part of the action, not as clients or recipients of aid, but as full contributors to the community-building process. Thus, the appropriate community assets can be tapped in building the collaboration.

Discoveries that may emerge from researching the community are potential collaborators or already existing collaborations. If an existing collaboration that is already addressing the group's purpose is identified, then collaboration or negotiation with that group can be explored so as to prevent duplicating services in the community.

MEMBERS OF THE COLLABORATION. A large emphasis should be placed on assuring that appropriate members be invited to join the collaboration. A diverse membership should include potentially impacted groups and individuals as well as agencies and organizations that will bring strength and resources (National Network for Collaboration, 1996; White & Wehlage, 1995). The National Assembly (1997) suggests particular questions that can be asked to clarify membership criteria, such as: What are the geographic boundaries for the collaboration? What sectors will be involved in the collaboration (business, non-profit, government, grassroots organizations, community individuals)? Must organizations be working actively in the identified problem areas? What level of commitment will be required for membership in the collaboration? Will a specific amount of financial and other resource commitment be required? Exploring such questions can lead to further examination in identifying appropriate members of the collaboration.

Besides local agencies, businesses, and other organizations in the community, another group—which is most often overlooked—exists in the community that can provide a valuable membership in a collaboration: the youth. The youth are a great resource for addressing community issues, especially those that involve youth. Collaborations need to see youth as resources for the community, and not as clients (The National Assembly, 1997). They can be involved in decision-making bodies of the community where instead of simply being recipients of programs, they have opportunities to lead, make decisions, and provide input to the programs and activities that involve them (Borden, et. al, 1998). Youth participation in a collaboration promotes ownership by allowing young people to participate in the development of solutions which affect their lives. Youth involvement also encourages development of leadership skills, enhances self-esteem, and provides the collaboration with an important source of information and ideas. The National Assembly (1997) provides several examples of how youth can participate in a collaboration:

- Youth can represent the youth's voice to a primarily adult collaboration by giving valuable insight into how programs affect them and their peers. They can also provide a reality check on the appropriateness of activities planned for other youth.

- Groups of young people can form an advisory committee to a primarily adult collaboration. This allows a more representative perspective by including a diverse group of youth. Representatives from the advisory committee can sit on the adult collaboration meetings and provide input from the whole youth committee.

- A combined youth/adult collaboration can be formed, especially if the collaboration is made up of youth membership organizations. This form of collaboration provides a unique opportunity for youth and adults to create shared lead-

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ership and develop youth and adult partnerships.

Essential Factors in Effective Collaborations

Literature on community collaborations list several factors that are essential in maintaining collaborations (The National Assembly, 1997; Rogers, et. al., 1996; Borden, et. al., 1998; National Network for Collaboration, 1996). In particular, two bodies of literature provide an extensive explanation of components for effective collaboration.

The National Assembly (1997) points out in their publication, *The New Community Collaboration Manual*, seven key concepts to successful collaborations: shared vision, skilled leadership, process orientation, diversity, membership-driven agenda, multiple sectors, and accountability.

Collaborations usually begin with a small group of interested representatives from different organizations brought together by a catalytic event or by common needs or values.

SHARED VISION refers to the idea that participants in a collaboration are willing to act together to meet a mutually identified need and that they believe the collaboration is useful. Shared vision requires trust among participants of the collaboration and coming to consensus around the group's mission statement that guides the decision-making and program activities. Lack of a common vision and opposition to the program's mission will eventually lead to a collapse of the collaboration.

SKILLED LEADERSHIP is an essential ingredient in a collaboration. Collaborations usually begin with a small group of interested representatives from different organizations brought together by a catalytic event or by common needs or values. Thus, these initial individuals have a stake in leadership and in the outcomes. As the collaboration evolves over time, new participants in the group need to feel a sense of responsibility for the success of the group, and leadership needs to be cultivated to prevent overburdening, controlling, or monopolizing within individuals of the group. The following are some characteristics and skills that good collaboration leaders might possess:

- ability to guide the group toward the collaboration's goals while seeking to include and explore all points of view
- comfort with consensus building and small group process
- respect in the community and knowledge about the issues the collaboration will address
- skill in negotiating turf issues;
- belief in the process of collaboration
- knowledge about the community and organizations in the community
- skill and persuasiveness in oral and written communication
- time to commit to leadership.

PROCESS ORIENTATION refers to the need for attention to be focused on the process of including people in the shared decision-making of the collaboration. An opportunity for all participants to have input and give minority opinions a full hearing is an important task for the collaboration. Conflict, which is natural in any group, will arise, and the key is to manage the conflict and channel it into useful solutions.

DIVERSITY provides strength to the collaboration. Community collaborations must be open to the richness that comes from including members of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and income groups. Diversity in a collaboration can result in creativity, increased understanding, and enhanced political clout.

MEMBERSHIP-DRIVEN AGENDA refers to the participants' sense of ownership in the collaboration. Many successful collaborations receive most of their resources from their members, such as time, space, contacts, in-kind services, or financial resources. When members contribute resources, their sense of ownership and buy-in in the col-

laboration is increased.

Multiple sectors refers to the inclusion of as many segments of the community as are compatible with the mission of the collaboration. One of the strengths of collaborations is that they bring together different segments of the community around a particular need or concern and attempt to forge a new style of working together. Depending on the collaboration and its community, a collaborative group may include businesses, grassroots groups, ethnic representation, or government, youth, and service clubs.

Accountability means specifying anticipated outcomes at the beginning, and then monitoring progress on a continuous basis so mid-course questions and challenges can be addressed. An evaluation of collaboration efforts and results should be planned from the outset to help collaborators decide how various efforts should be modified, expanded or dropped. Attention to accountability in the early stages of building the collaboration helps to set realistic expectations for the collaborators and those the collaboration seeks to serve.

Another study points to similar essential factors for effective collaborations. In an evaluation of 12 collaborative community projects in California, Rogers, et. al. (1996) identified six categories relating to the success of community collaborations. These categories were taken from Mattessich and Monsey's (1992) extensive review of the collaboration literature. The six categories are environmental, membership, process/structure, communication, purpose, and resource.

Environmental characteristics refer to the importance of geographic location and social context within which a collaborative group exists. Such factors include:

- history of collaboration or cooperation in the community
- collaborative group seen as a leader in the community
- favorable political and social climate

Membership characteristics consist of skills, attitudes and opinions of the individuals in the collaborative group, as well as the culture and ability of those organizations which form the collaborative. Included in this category are:

- mutual respect, understanding, and trust among collaborative members
- appropriate cross-section of individuals within the community who will be affected by the collaborative activities
- ability to compromise as numerous decisions are made in a collaborative effort

Process/structure refers to the management, decision-making, and operational systems of the collaborative effort. Included in this category are:

- evoking a sense of ownership in the collaborative effort through the recognition that members share a stake in both process and outcome
- recognizing the multiple layers of management within a collaborative and building organizational mechanisms to provide strong connections between them
- the collaboration's ability for flexibility and adaptability in its structure and methods
- the development of clear roles and policy guidelines

Communication refers to the channels used by the members of the collaboration to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey opinions to influence the group's actions. Included in this category are:

- establishing informal and formal communication processes
- frequency of communication among members to update and discuss issues openly

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PURPOSE FACTORS include the reasons for the development of the collaborative effort, the result or vision the collaborative group seeks, and the specific tasks necessary to achieve their goals. Included in this category are:

- concrete, attainable goals and objectives
- a shared vision with clearly agreed-upon mission, objectives and strategies
- a unique purpose for the collaborative group

RESOURCE FACTORS are the strengths that each of the collaborators bring to the group. Included in this category are:

- sufficient financial base and other resources, such as personnel, space, and in-kind services—whether through its members or outside sources—to support the collaboration's operations
- skilled conveners with strong organizing and interpersonal skills

In sum, common underlying themes of key factors for effective collaborations emerge from both The National Assembly's (1997) and Rogers, et. al. (1996) descriptions, as well as from several other authors on collaborations (Rist, 1992; Borden, et. al., 1998; National Network for Collaboration, 1996; Hogue, 1993; Melaville, 1991).

Challenges to Collaboration

Building and maintaining community collaborations is an on-going and complex process. It is essential to understand that collaborations will encounter obstacles and challenges over time. In community collaboration projects evaluated by White & Wehlage (1995) and Rogers, et. al., (1996), the authors identified common themes regarding the challenges that those collaborations experienced. It is important to highlight some of these recurring themes in order to provide insight into the challenges that may arise in all phases of any collaboration.

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY BEYOND THE INITIAL PLANNING STAGE OF THE COLLABORATION was the most common challenge found among the collaboration projects evaluated. The evaluators found that the collaborations had difficulty encouraging community residents to become full participants and become active in decision-making in the collaborative effort (Rogers, et. al., 1996). One reason for the difficulty in involving the community is the community members' lack of trust in the collaboration. The leaders of the collaboration were perceived as outsiders and therefore had to undertake different strategies to gain their trust. Such strategies included asking community members to recruit additional members of the community to the collaboration, or going to the local service agencies to recruit community members, rather than visiting their homes and distributing information regarding the collaboration's agenda.

Another challenge to involving the community was **THE POWER DIFFERENTIAL BETWEEN COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND AGENCY PROFESSIONALS**. It was a challenge for the community residents and agency personnel to work together as a cohesive entity. In the collaboration projects that Rogers, et. al., (1996) evaluated, most members of the collaborations were professionals from the community, who were generally well-educated, professional in their presentation and manner, and fully comfortable with the culture of professional meetings. In contrast, community residents were largely low-income men and women who had many years' fewer education, some did not speak English, and had less experience attending professional meetings. Establishing an atmosphere of equality between the community members and agency personnel was a great challenge for the collaborations. One strategy found to be ef-

fective was for the collaboration to assign a professional "buddy", who was a member of the collaboration, to drive with a group of residents to the collaboration meetings so they could talk about the meetings before and after. All meetings were bilingual and all the information were translated into the different languages of the community. Also, the residents attending those meetings were specifically asked to voice their opinion in all of the action items on the agenda.

UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PROCESS TAKES TIME was another challenge. In a comprehensive community initiative evaluated by White and Wehlage (1995), building the collaboration was very time consuming and process-intensive, especially in the beginning. The authors identified some critical steps that required a significant amount of time in the beginning of the collaborative endeavor: 1) developing partners committed to long-term efforts; 2) conducting detailed assessments of current conditions and the current state of services and resources; and 3) building the management capacities necessary to sustain the effort over time and through changes in leadership. It is important for collaborations to realize that the process takes time and it is essential to have the patience to be flexible with this time when designing, implementing, and sustaining the collaborative project.

CONTINUING THE COLLABORATION'S EFFORTS once the initial funding was depleted was another great challenge. Once the funding was terminated, some collaborative projects found it difficult to maintain enough interest in the community to continue to work toward the projects' goals without the seed money (Rogers, et. al., 1996). The authors pointed out that it is important to plan for project sustainability at the beginning of the collaborative process. Thus, it is necessary for community members to become active partners in the collaboration so that a vested interest is established in continuing the efforts once startup funding has expired.

Despite the challenges that the collaborations faced, the authors' evaluations of collaborative projects clearly indicated positive events within the communities involved with various collaborative efforts (White and Wehlage, 1995; Rogers, et. al., 1996). Some of the explicit changes that occurred through the efforts of collaboration and community involvement include: more individuals were aware of and accessing community-based services; community streets became safer for children and families; and a forum for Spanish-speaking parents to voice their opinions to the school district was established.

Conclusion

Collaboration presents a potential wealth of opportunities for building partnerships in the community and providing effective services and programs for children and families. Collaboration is also a time-intensive, challenging, learning process. With a thorough understanding of the advantages and challenges of community collaborations, programs that serve to promote the well-being of children and families can clearly benefit from collaborating with other organizations in the community. Many programs that are already involved in collaborative efforts attest to the many benefits of a collaboration, such as making services more accessible and effective, pooling together scarce resources, and bringing the community closer together. The National Assembly (1997) echoes the value of a collaboration and states: "Organizations benefit when they join collaborations. They find new resources, opportunities for shared programming and training, a stronger community presence, and support for the work they are doing." Each community is unique and each collaboration is unique. In order to effectively serve the children and families in our communi-

It is necessary for community members to become active partners in the collaboration so that a vested interest is established in continuing the efforts once startup funding has expired.

ties, future planning and strategies for building collaborations must build on the commitment, creativity, and strength of the diverse members of the community.

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Bernadette Sangalang, MSW, is the CYFAR Coordinator and Evaluator in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of California at Davis.

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Director	Richard Ponzio
Winter 99 Editor	Ramona Carlos
Research Associates	Ramona Carlos Ella Madsen Sally Stanley
Publications Coordinator	Charlene Logan
Design and Layout	Charlene Logan
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The 4-H Center for Youth Development
Department of Human and Community Development
University of California
One Shields Avenue
Davis, CA 95616-8523
Phone (530) 754-8432
Fax (530) 754-8440
fourhcyd@ucdavis.edu