



# Collective impact

*What we REALLY know.*

This report summarizes what we really know about collective impact from a variety of perspectives. The information is primarily drawn from the Collective Impact Summit, convened by the Network for Nonprofit and Social Impact at Northwestern University in November 2015. The Summit brought together thought leaders from national networks that support collective impact initiatives and scholars from business, community development, communication, public administration, education, and social work. What we learned is that collective impact is not something completely new or untried, and key lessons can be drawn from both academic research and practice. However, questions remain as to key elements of the model and its efficacy for improving educational outcomes.

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5/23/16



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## WHAT IS COLLECTIVE IMPACT?

The term “collective impact” first appeared in a *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article in 2011. This article, by John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG Consulting, has become one of the highest-cited articles in *SSIR*’s history and prompted numerous follow-up articles; additionally, collective impact networks number at least in the hundreds within the United States.

Collective impact is defined as “the commitment of a group of important actors from the different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” Specifically, collective impact is distinct from other forms of collaboration by its inclusion of the following:

- *Common agenda.* All partners share a vision for change that includes a shared understanding of and approach to the problem.
- *Shared measurement system.* Partners commit to collect data and evaluate results using the same criteria.
- *Mutually reinforcing activities.* Rather than create new programs, partners coordinate and align activities so that they support one another and fit into an overall plan.
- *Continuous communication.* Collective impact calls for trust and a common vocabulary, which are built in part through frequent meetings and Web-based tools.
- *Backbone organization.* Because coordinating collective impact efforts is time-intensive, a backbone organization is required to coordinate partners and efforts.

Before beginning a collective impact project, experts suggest that a community needs an influential champion to bring leaders together, financial



resources to sustain the first 2-3 years of operations, and urgency for change around a particular issue. Having established these preconditions, there are three phases of collective impact organizing: initiating action (in which key players and projects are identified and baseline data is collected), organizing for impact (in which partners determine shared goals and measures, create a backbone infrastructure and begin to align organizational activities), and sustaining action and impact (which includes further collection of data, coordination, and active learning as partners evaluate their progress on their shared goals).

### **Partners in Collective Impact**

Collective impact efforts are cross-sector partnerships and thus encourage nonprofit, government, and corporate collaboration. In addition, collective impact often emphasizes the role of funders or philanthropists in initiating and sustaining these partners. Though scholars have pointed out that collective impact differs from grassroots organizing, collective impact encourages community engagement, and some initiatives specifically encourage youth involvement.

Under the umbrella of improving educational outcomes, several national networks have emerged. These include StriveTogether's Cradle to Career Network, the Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21 initiative, and America's Promise GradNation communities, along with various initiatives from United Way, and the Aspen Institute. Although these groups differ somewhat in their approach to collective impact, as well as the indicators used to measure success, all are focused on collective approaches to improving education. In addition to these groups, other initiatives adhere to the principles of collective impact but are not affiliated with a national network. Other entities that support and provide resources to collective impact initiatives include the Collective Impact Forum (a partnership of FSG and the Aspen Institute), and the Tamarack Institute.

### **Collective Impact in Education**

Although collective impact has been applied to environmental concerns, poverty, housing, and other large-scale community problems, collective impact is a particularly popular strategy to improve educational outcomes. Because of collective impact's emphasis on complex social problems, most of



these initiatives include efforts to improve both educational outcomes and physical/social-emotional factors that may affect a child’s ability to learn.

Some projects work towards a singular goal (e.g., reducing the high school dropout rate by a certain percentage) by addressing related and peripheral factors. However, others address a more comprehensive goal of improving educational outcomes across different

*Collective impact is a particularly popular strategy to improve educational outcomes.*

stages of development. “Cradle to career,” an expression used by StriveTogether and commonly used across other collective impact efforts, refers to the use of specific indicators to improve educational outcomes from early childhood through college completion and career preparation. Both of these approaches are consistent with collective impact frameworks.

Additionally, collective impact occurs in a variety of communities. Collective efforts are underway in urban, rural, and suburban areas; collective impact efforts have been contained to single cities or extended across multiple counties or entire regions.

### **Successful Case Studies in Collective Impact**

Although many collective impact initiatives are in their early stages, several successful cases have emerged (see additional case study resources at the end of this report). Perhaps the best known example is the StrivePartnership in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. Recognizing that the community was “program rich, but system poor,” local leaders joined forces to collect data, identify shared goals, and work across various organizations to align efforts and ultimately improve educational attainment. Within five years of the initial partnership, Strive leaders recorded numerous improvements, including increases in kindergarten readiness, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment. The partnership continues these efforts with the support of local foundations, an organizational structure built to support collective efforts, and a detailed roadmap of indicators of the partnership’s desired outcomes.

Collective impact initiatives are typically long-term projects working towards ambitious goals; however, partners typically rely upon indicators to show



progress. For example, the Road Map Project in Seattle began in 2010 and set the year 2020 as its prime year for performance targets. However, partners also set goals for 2014 and 2017 that serve as indicators that the project is on track – and thus far, data suggests that students in participating districts are attaining post-secondary degrees or credentials at a rate higher than area students in non-participating districts. Additionally, the Road Map’s efforts were boosted by the receipt of \$40 million in federal funding through a Race to the Top district grant, suggesting increased interest in funding collective efforts.

Successful collective impact also relies on cross-sector partnership and community engagement. In Nashville, data revealed gaps in high school graduation rates and adult mentorship. To combat this problem, the mayor’s office convened a cross-sector task force that worked on health, safety, out of school time, education, and mobility and stability as they pertain to youth. Additionally, the task force involved area youth through a series of surveys and focus groups and a partnership with the Mayor’s Youth Council. The task force produced a Children and Youth Master Plan that relies upon Ready by 21 strategies to achieve various outcomes. The plan is, in part, drawn from community and youth perspectives and relies on youth involvement to achieve its goals.

### **Is Collective Impact Really a New Approach?**

Questions persist as to how collective impact differs from other forms of collaboration. Observers find differentiating collective impact from other approaches challenging, in part because the term has become so popular that many collaborative endeavors use it without adhering to the five conditions. Others have questioned whether collective impact is truly a new approach at all.

Champions of collective impact acknowledge that collaboration in response to social problems is a common approach; additionally, they acknowledge that some may not distinguish collective impact from other forms of collaboration. Yet advocates claim that the five conditions of collective impact make it distinct from other forms and suggest that collective impact may be successful where other forms of collaboration have failed.

Researchers have suggested that proponents of collective impact have ignored existing research on collaboration, networks, coalitions, and data-based education reform efforts. Although collective impact may be a new approach, researchers claim that collective efforts would be informed by greater consideration of this knowledge. They argue that, by ignoring prior work, practitioners are spending time and resources on identifying and solving problems that were already identified and solved in previously studied initiatives. There were several areas in which knowledge from previous academic research and robust practice across thought leaders suggested that we could draw conclusive results about collective impact. These are described in the following section.

## **THE STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE OF CROSS-SECTOR INTERORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS**

*What we know:* The collective impact model bears strong resemblance to some of the previous models of cross-sector interorganizational networks and coalitions. The similarities between the two approaches suggest several challenges. First, investors and funders are confused as to the difference when the “collaboration” initiatives they have been supporting are replaced by the use of the term “collective impact.” Researchers have been similarly confused because the collective impact approach resembles networks they have previously studied, and, finally, leaders struggle to put collective impact into action.

However, research reveals that we know quite a bit about networks, and, specifically, how effective networks function. Successful networks emphasize:

- The centralization of services through a central backbone organization (also referred to as an anchor entity or network administrative organization) leads to better quality outcomes for clients.
- Stability. Research suggests that stable networks perform better than one that is constantly altered.
- Direct government funding and regulation for clear accountability (although collective impact networks may not be as dependent on government funding).



- *Some* form of governance, although arrangements can be flexible; for example, self-governance is often sufficient for smaller networks.
- Trust and legitimacy. Partner history shapes future interactions; likewise, networks succeed when partners – and those outside the network – believe in what the network is trying to do.
- Life cycle effects. Start-up networks look and act differently from mature networks, and networks may change as the goals change.

*One of the key challenges for the national collective impact movement is determining what elements of the collective impact model are core and what can be adapted.*

*What we don't know:* A review of previous research on cross-sector interorganizational networks and the available practice-based research on collective impact networks reveal some unanswered questions:

- The five conditions of collective impact set a high bar for networks and point to questions regarding the necessary level of agreement or adherence to a common agenda for a network to be successful. One of the key challenges for the national collective impact movement is determining what elements of the collective impact model are core and what can be adapted.
- Privilege and power varies across a network; particular individuals may also be difficult to work with but have relevant resources or experiences. Alternatively, networks may possess “toxic” nodes that are less concerned with the network’s success. Questions remain as how to best manage these nodes.

## **CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION TO SOLVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

*What we know:* Collective impact also bears strong resemblance to some previously described forms of collaboration, though the term “collaboration” has different geographic and cultural connotations and is thus used in different ways. As is the case with network research, there is a significant body of collaboration research that informs what scholars and practitioners may experience in collective impact. The vast majority of this evidence, both from the academic scholarship and from the evidence for collective impact,

comes from case studies. Case studies provide a rich description of collaboration practices and processes, but they are not generalizable. It is unclear if what seems to be the factor that seems to be key for success in one case study was also present in several unstudied and failing cases.

Despite these limitations, there are some conclusions based upon the preponderance of evidence that can be drawn from previous research.

- Research defines the motivations that bring stakeholders together to solve social problems. These may include:
  - Environmental reasons, such as a policy window that seems to have opened with respect to a particular social issue.
  - Resources, including either a need for resources, or the ability to offer resources for the collaboration.
  - Interpersonal dynamics, such as prior common experience or social ties with other collaborators.
- Collaboration research also suggests the following factors that influence partnership success:
  - Collaborations require time to get started, to negotiate, conduct measurement and evaluation, and scale up their efforts.
  - The development of rules or norms of partner engagement also plays an important role in predicting collaboration effectiveness.
  - Although collaborative teams do not need to trust completely in all the partners, there needs to be a shared sense that organizational leaders will keep their promises in order to maintain momentum in the collaboration.
  - Collaboration is unlikely to be successful with the current funding strategies. Collaboration does not generate resources in and of itself, and partnerships require more time, resources, and infrastructure than going it alone.

*The extent to which collective impact initiatives can identify why stakeholders collaborate improves the likelihood of bring additional stakeholders to the table.*

*What we don't know:* However, there were several large questions that neither collaboration research nor collective impact practice can yet answer. These include:





- The number of stakeholders needed to affect change. Questions remain as to whether collaboration requires several people from the same organization, or a single leader to represent each organization. Members of collective impact initiatives may also differ in their opinions as to how many organizations should be involved in the partnership.
- The best platforms for information sharing. There are a host of new platforms available for collaboration, information sharing, project management, and data management. However, we do not know which platforms prove more successful in collaboration outcomes, or whether a combination of platforms may be better suited to collective process.
- Funder involvement in collaboration. Increasingly, funders would like to be involved as a partner in collective impact initiatives, as demonstrated by the provision of numerous networking and financial resources to support the work. However, as powerful actor, the presence of funders often undermines open information sharing among partner agencies.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*What we know:* Researchers and collective impact thought leaders shared a common pool of knowledge to draw from in terms of network governance and the collaboration process. However, collective impact initiatives have come late to issues of community engagement, having focused more on senior organizational leaders than on individuals that are most impacted. Put another way, community engagement has been a blind spot in many collective impact approaches, although researchers and practitioners agree on the following key differences between community development approaches to social impact and collective impact initiatives:

- Community development approaches depend on ensuring conditions for community success or community health. In contrast, collective impact begins with creating a coalition of senior-level organizational actors.
- Community development approaches focus on community-driven solutions as a response to their most felt needs, whereas collective impact approaches suggest that data should inform programs and

*Community engagement has been a blind spot in many collective impact approaches.*



- practices.
- Community development approaches empowers those most affected by the social issue by encouraging decision-making within the community. Collective impact approaches, in contrast, rely more on senior organizational leaders who have the decision-making authority to re-make organizational systems.

*What we don't know:*

The degree to which these approaches are compatible is unknown. However, community development approaches may inform some collective impact strategies to address the equity issues that are often present – and increasingly realized by collective impact leadership. Representation of individuals or groups at leadership tables is often tokenism as opposed to real engagement; there is some concern that having people “at the table” is not enough to impact real change.

## CHALLENGES USING EDUCATION METRICS FOR INFORMED DECISION MAKING

*What we know:* The last category of knowledge represents the largest disagreement in what we know.

*What we don't know:*

- Academic researchers were dubious about collective impact initiatives' ability to use education data for continuous quality improvement. They noted that collective impact networks do not work in a vacuum, suggesting a number of additional contextual factors that may affect their success. Unless those contextual factors are accounted for, academics argue that “noise” in the data may be misleading with respect to what is influencing changes in leading indicators and outcomes measures.
- In addition, many collective impact initiatives are conducting multi-faceted initiatives that influence a common population of students in a variety of ways. Complex statistical analysis is needed to account for these multiple

*Academic researchers were dubious about collective impact initiatives' ability to use education data for continuous quality*



- interventions, but many collective impact networks do not have the data analytic capabilities address these changes.
- The population of study is constantly changing. As such, data must track the same students over time, rather than just examining changes in aggregate data for a school or a district.
  - Some apparent effects in descriptive statistics and scores are actually due to issues such as maturation and students self-selecting into certain interventions. Statistical controls and rolling deployment are needed to attribute effects to particular program or initiatives. Each of these concerns might serve as areas for evaluation capacity-building in collective impact initiatives.

*A way forward?* Despite this disagreement, both practitioners and academic agreed on a number of best practices that they would advise for collective impact initiatives.

- Focus on outputs rather than inputs; fidelity to the model is important, but outcomes are what ultimately matters.
- Identify objective measures, as leaders may feel positively about a program even if the program fails to achieve its goals.
- Explore the presence of the counterfactual by using a control group or asking what would have happened in the absence of a particular intervention being studied.
- Data in and of itself is not necessarily useful; it has to be cleaned, analyzed, disaggregated as much as possible, and interpreted.
- Programs should be designed and implemented in ways that will make them easier to evaluate.

### **Areas of Further Development in Collective Impact**

Equally important, we unearthed several unresolved issues in collective impact where there is insufficient evidence to promote best practices.

1. Much of the leadership or management literature emphasizes management of hierarchical organizations. However, the best practices for running these organizations do not translate to networks such as collective impact. A leadership theory is needed for networks to further explore how individuals and coalitions manage and respond to the challenges of running collective impact or similar initiatives.

2. The collective impact model is challenging for many communities because of long-term implementation strategies. We also do not know which of these elements can be adapted and which have to be adopted exactly as is.
3. Similarly, we do not know which contexts it will apply to best and which contexts do not lend themselves to a collective impact model.
4. We don't have conclusive principles for collaboration processes such as:
  - How many people need to be involved in order to effect change?
  - What are the best platforms for information sharing?
  - How involved should funders be in the collaboration process?
5. We are dubious about the use of education data for decision making if clear data standards are not used. Clear data standards and the sufficient capacity to employ them are not just about making the results more “academically acceptable.” Instead, without those standards, collective impact initiatives are likely to draw the wrong conclusions about the best practices to improve educational outcomes for youth.
6. It is still unknown as to whether the collective impact model works better than any other approach. If a network does meet the five conditions of collective impact, how can we know that this approach works better than networks that don't meet these conditions? Collective impact is described as meeting the *So what?* question, but researchers and practitioners do not yet know the answer to the *Compared to what?* question.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Collective Impact Summit revealed common ground and interest across research and practice, different disciplinary approaches, and different models of collective impact. Participants suggested that there is much to draw from network and collaboration research and practice that may inform collective impact models. However, collective impact models fail to make use of best practices for community engagement and data-driven decision-making. Finally, the Collective Impact Summit highlighted the benefits of building knowledge across researchers and practitioners engaged in these issues. We hope to continue these conversations through the study of collective impact initiatives with the ability to inform practice and policy.



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