FALL 2021

BUILDING PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

A WHITE PAPER

BAYER CENTER FOR NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

In recent years, the need for collaboration between nonprofit entities has burgeoned as nonprofit organizations are being called upon to work together to solve extensive, diverse, complex societal issues that exceed the capacity of any individual organization (e.g. food/water insecurity, homelessness, inequality, immigration, climate change) (Mattessich and Johnson, 2018; Morris, Webb, & Franklin, 2011). Layer on a global pandemic at a time when the number of nonprofit organizations is proliferating, and the need for deeper and sustained collaboration becomes even more important.

In many ways, the pandemic elevated the need for meaningful and sustained collaboration as the demand for nonprofit supports became clear and huge. While society was leaning on the social service sector, many nonprofits were struggling with their own set of challenges, including fewer resources and fewer staff (Kulish, 2020). Thus, the need for nonprofit collaboration was essential, swift, and complex.

Collaboration enables organizations to more effectively address complex societal problems by leveraging shared resources (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). In a world of scarcity, effective collaboration can promote greater efficiency, quality, and responsiveness (Gazley & Guo, 2020).

Nevertheless, collaboration does not always lead to the desired outcomes, even during times of dire circumstances. In fact, even when collaborations are supported by the philanthropic and public sectors, nonprofit partnerships are often laden with trials and challenges (Mendel & Brudney, 2007). The most well-intentioned partnerships can be doomed by resource competition, insufficient capacity, or lack of role clarity.

Since collaborative success is not guaranteed, nonprofit leaders need better guidance. This is particularly true if there is any hope that partnerships forged during the pandemic will continue and flourish. As Mattessich and Johnson (2018, p. 3) state, “Similar to any other tool, if applied wrongly, [collaboration] will not function well. Yet when appropriately applied, collaboration offers a strategic tool of value.”

Successful collaboration is dependent on more than a quick cost-benefit analysis, which, according to recent research, is how many nonprofit leaders determine if they are going to embark on a partnership. Does the time, effort, opportunity cost, and risk outweigh the possible positive outcome (Mendel & Brudney, 2018)? However, the success of collaborative efforts is frequently much more complex. After extensive research, the Amherst Wilder Foundation found that successful collaboration is built upon the presence of 22 characteristics, including trust, mutual respect, open and frequent communication, and continuous learning.

The Building Productive Partnerships Program aimed to equip community nonprofit leaders with the tools and knowledge necessary to better coordinate, cooperate, collaborate, and address the complexities of our region. In phase I, carefully selected organizations learned about the principles of effective partnership. In phase II, a subset of five organizations were invited to build collaborative projects that utilized their shared assets in service to a community need.

col·lab·o·ra·tion [kuh-lab-uh-rey-shuhn]

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.

The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards. (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018, p.5)

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Building on their own 20-year partnership, the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE) and The Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University (BCNM) drew on years of expertise in nonprofit management support. Each organization brought unique proficiencies to the program: PACE has a rich history in selection processes and grantmaking, while the Bayer Center has extensive experience providing educational programs to nonprofit professionals. As a result of their longevity and experience, both organizations have deep knowledge of the community and are considered to be trusted resources.

Thanks to generous support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, this program equipped community nonprofit board and staff leaders to better coordinate, cooperate, collaborate, and address the inherent challenges. Fourteen organizations were selected to participate in the program.

In phase I, the organizations learned about principles of effective partnership via five online sessions. Each session featured national and local experts as guest speakers, practical tools, small group work, and homework assignments. Of the 14 organizations that participated in phase I, 11 opted to propose a collaborative project and compete for seed money in phase II. Of those 11 organizations, eight chose to partner with another organization from the cohort.

Ultimately, based on the merit of their proposed collaborative projects, two teams, (representing five organizations) advanced to phase II. In phase II, organizations designed collaborative projects to marry their shared assets in service to a community need. Educational support, project management, and individual coaching were provided to both teams. At the conclusion of the program, both teams effectively demonstrated the lessons learned before a panel of esteemed community leaders who determined the allocation of seed funds. Both of these projects and leaders can be touted as community role models.

outcomes: phase I

87%

of program participants anticipate joining a collaboration in the next 6-12 months

After participating in this program:

93%

of participants reported to a great or very great extent that they were more likely to participate in a partnership that returns value to their organization and community.

90%

reported to a great or very great extent that they feel future collaborations will be more successful based on what they learned in the program.

91%

reported to a great or very great extent that they better understand how to nurture a partnership.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

phase I:

Selection process: Participants were selected based on a rubric evaluating each organization's collaboration history, ability to commit to the program, potential ideas for a collaboration, organizational diversity, and BCNM's and/or PACE's previous experience with the organization.

Number of participating organizations: 14; on average 40 individuals (representing board and staff) participated in each session.

Program logistics: three-hour sessions, once a week for five weeks, via Zoom.

Program content: Ten instructional modules were provided. Guest speakers and small group discussions were incorporated into each session. The modules included: using human-centered design to explore collaboration successes and failures; skilled leadership; building trust among stakeholders; process and structure; legal considerations; and evaluation.*

At the end of phase I, participating organizations could submit a concept poster and video application to be considered for phase II. The poster and video application detailed a potential collaborative idea.

**note: a course syllabus can be provided, upon request.*

phase II:

Selection process: Videos and concept posters submitted at the end of phase I were evaluated based on participation and attendance in phase I, as well as completeness, feasibility, quality and bravery of the project

Number of participating organizations: 5; representing two different collaborative projects

Program logistics: 6, 1.5 to 2-hour sessions over nine weeks, via Zoom. Culminating in a presentation to a panel of community leaders, who determined the allocation of seed funds.

Program content: During the sessions, teams applied the knowledge and concepts learned in phase I to bring their collaborative projects to fruition. For instance, they created budgets and worked with an attorney to produce a memorandum of understanding (MOU). In addition to these sessions, tailored support, such as retreats, discussion, and facilitation, were provided based on each team's unique needs.

At the end of phase II, each team presented their collaborative project to a panel of esteemed community leaders. Seed money was awarded to both teams based on how effectively their respective collaborations evidenced impact and quality; process and structure; mutual trust and respect; communication; and capacity to execute the project.

WHAT WE LEARNED

THE USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED TOOLS

The Building Productive Partnerships Program was built on the judicious use of relevant tools, texts, and exercises in conjunction with local expertise. The goal was to ensure collaboration strategies were guided by research, but grounded by expert opinions and organizational values. Ultimately, this proved to be a successful approach.

Equipping organizations and individuals with evidence-based tools allowed them to make better decisions and provided resources for future decisions. Not only did participants cite highlighted, dog-ear folded pages during class, but many interviewees reported continued use of the textbook and materials from the shared Google drive. According to a six-month post-program survey, 72% of respondents are still using the tools to some, great, or very great degree. In interviews, participants said:

> *The team chose compelling material. The book meant so much to me. I marked it up. There isn't a page that doesn't have comments or highlights.*

> *I refer back to my book to go through the points and say to myself, 'Are you thinking through these? Are you covering everything you should be?' It has brought to light things we need to be cautious about. It helps with risk mitigation. If [the other organization] can't answer the tough questions, I have to question whether I want to work with them.*

DIVERSITY OF THE COHORT

Additionally, careful attention was given to the composition of the cohort. The program was promoted broadly within the regional nonprofit community. Twenty-five organizations submitted an application; however, only 14 were selected to participate in the program. The selected organizations represented diversity across many measures including: type, size, age, service region, and race/ethnicity/gender composition of leadership. The intention was to create non-traditional partnerships, and the diversity of the cohort was valuable.

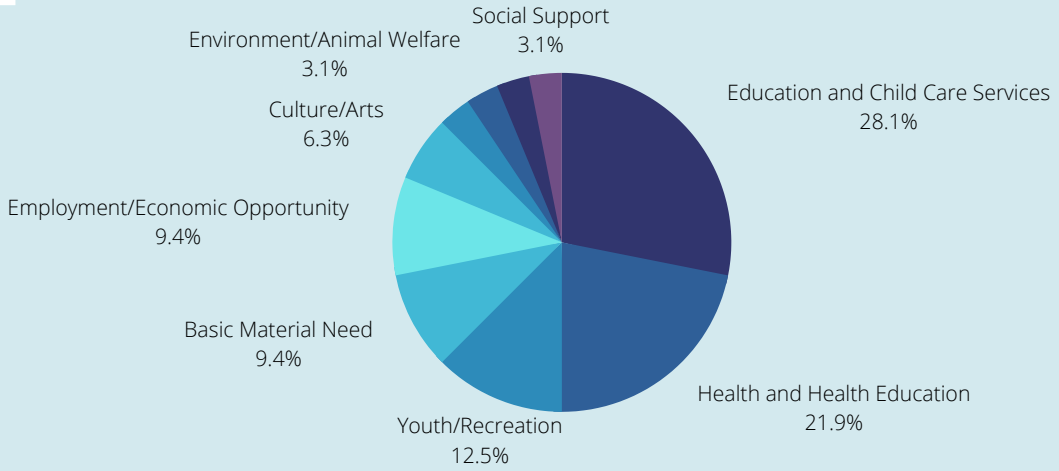
> *I liked how diverse the group was. If you get all of the same types of organizations in the room, there would be competition. We're working hard to be more diverse, and I was sitting in a room with people who serve the populations we want to serve.*

The diversity of the cohort also provided an opportunity to learn more about the nonprofit landscape and the varied needs of individuals in our community. In some cases, it allowed participating organizations to better understand and support their own constituents. One participant valued the opportunity to provide more holistic care to their organization's participants:

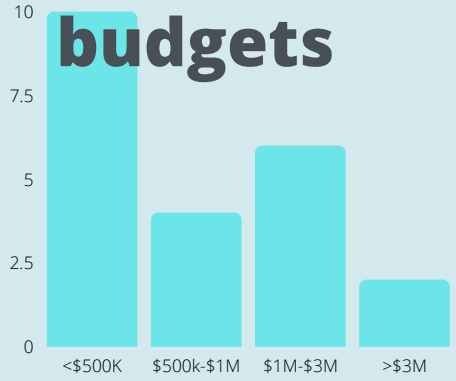
> *If we aren't involved in programs like this, we don't understand all of the challenges people face. It allows us to be better for the people we serve. We can connect them with resources based on their needs. I can pick up a phone and call someone in the cohort. It was really valuable to me.*

In order to build those connections, relationship-building is critical. Thus, during each session, there were activities and assignments to encourage program participants to interact with one another (e.g. interview assignments and small group discussions).

composition of the cohort

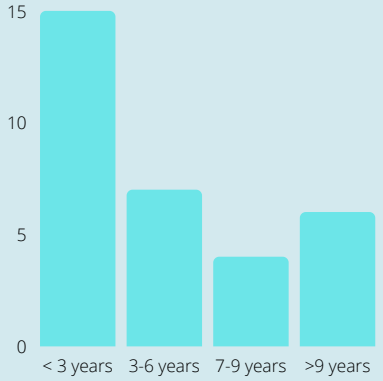


mostly small budgets



diverse, by type

newer to role



THE APPLICATION OF ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES

In 1970, Malcolm Knowles published an article that acknowledged effectively teaching adults requires more than simply transmitting knowledge. Instead, several principles should be employed to engage and educate adult learners. Thus, **the design of this program applied the principles of adult learning**, including:

- Experience: Adult learners bring their life experiences to their learning environment. Thus, it is important to connect learning to existing experience and knowledge. This program required participants to draw upon prior knowledge to complete activities and assignments.
- Self-directed learning: Adult learners need to have control of their learning. Thus, this program offered assignments and opportunities to dig deeper. (e.g. A Google drive where participants could explore additional resources and upload additional content to share with others.)
- Need to know: Adult learners need to feel relevancy of the skill or knowledge they are acquiring. To achieve this principle, real-world examples and case studies were utilized, so that participants could to reflect on their own experiences.
- Ready to learn: Adult learners are ready to learn. Beyond the joy of learning, participants recognized collaborations are necessary and prevalent for nearly every organization. There was a universal desire to learn how to build more effective partnerships.

INHERENT CHALLENGES

By nearly all measures, participants found value in the program. Nevertheless, challenges arose largely as a result of a global pandemic that required sessions to be virtual and attention to be diverted.

The virtual sessions diminished opportunities for spontaneous connection. Various efforts were made to encourage open and unstructured dialogue. For instance, online sessions were opened 15 minutes early, and participants were encouraged to arrive early and engage in informal dialogue. The private chat function was enabled so that participants could connect privately during the sessions. Additionally, each session began with a matrix tool to monitor the interactions that occurred among organizations between each session. Each session also featured break-out sessions, in which participants were randomly assigned to a small group. Efforts were made to ensure the groups represented as many different organizations as possible. Also, a LinkedIn group was established to further encourage connection and networking. Despite these efforts, participants did not believe that a fully virtual program was an equal substitute for an in-person program.

> *Part of the issue was the pandemic. It was hard to do not face-to-face; you couldn't read people's interest. You couldn't see their passion offline.*

Additionally, there was an expressed **desire for a more intense experience.** According to the post-program survey, the weekly frequency and the three-hour duration of sessions in phase I was right; however, participants wanted additional sessions. In both the immediate and six-month post-program surveys, participants indicated additional sessions would provide more opportunities to build relationships and digest the information. Several participants acknowledged it was difficult to fully absorb the information, as many were still adapting and reeling from the impacts of a global pandemic.

The online nature of the program minimized capacity concerns. In an effort to ensure broad engagement and support, all teams had to include a board member; however, the number of participants was not limited. Several organizations routinely had five to six participants at each session. While this provided organizations a professional development opportunity, it made it more challenging to establish meaningful relationships. Therefore, future cohorts should be limited to a maximum of three individuals per organization.

Finally, one organization in phase II did not participate in phase I. Although the new organization had a long-standing relationship with a phase I participant and was thus invited to partner on a phase II project, this proved to be a challenge. Participants from the new organization were skilled and experienced; however, having not been a part of phase I, there was no shared context and no benefit of spending five weeks in collaboration-focused learning and conversation. Thus, future cohorts would benefit if **all participating organizations shared the full program experience.**

growth in the success factors

The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory is used to assess strengths and weaknesses of a collaborative project. The research-based tool assesses a collaboration based on the 22 factors found to influence success.

Each group completed the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory before and after phase II of the program.

One group showed improvement for 18 of the 22 factors. The other group reported improvement for 20 of the 22 factors.

IMPLICATION

Nonprofit organizations are being called upon to address systemic and increasingly complex issues; thus, collaboration is a critical tool in any organization's arsenal. The Building Productive Partnerships Program reinforced this scholarship by providing opportunities to learn and apply the elements of successful collaboration. Extensive program evaluations indicate that this program demonstrated a positive impact for the participating organizations and the communities they serve.

We recommend that this program be offered on an annual basis to provide organizations with an opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships or effectively build new ones. Continuing to equip nonprofit organizations with a collaboration toolkit is essential to the future vitality of our region. Therefore, any organization considering a collaboration should have access to quality resources to ensure a thoughtful and structured approach.

CONCLUSION

Almost universally, participants described an "eyes wide open" impact. The Building Productive Partnership Program provided many tangential benefits; however, the true value of the program was that it made individuals think more critically about the investment of organizational resources. Participants recognized, "A good idea isn't enough…"

PARTICIPANTS

PHASE I

A Giving Heart
Bethany Community Ministries
Brothers and Sisters Emerging (BASE)
Coraopolis Youth Creations/ When She Thrives
Dress for Success
Gateway Medical Society
Global Links
Global Switchboard
Grounded Strategies
Homewood Children's Village
New Century Careers
Storyburgh
The Education Partnership
The Learning Lamp

PHASE II

Dress for Success
New Century Careers
When She Thrives
City of Pittsburgh, Welcoming Pittsburgh Initiative
Global Switchboard

GUEST SPEAKERS

Carol Bebelle, Ashe Cultural Arts Center
Joel Burstein, Keep it Simple Training & Development
Trisha Gadson, PhD, Macedonia Family & Community Enrichment Center
Paul Mattessich, PhD, Wilder Foundation
Abigail Salisbury, Salisbury Legal, LLC.
Esther Stief, Crossroads Foundation

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FUNDER

Richard King Mellon Foundation

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*Denotes textbook used during sessions in phase I and phase II