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# Models of Social Change: Community Foundations and Agenda Setting

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*Keywords: Community foundations, social change, agenda setting, college access*

## Key Points

- This article focuses on a particular approach to large-scale, community-based educational change – Local College Access Networks in the state of Michigan – to answer two key questions: What factors serve to shape the social-change agenda? How can community foundations serve to promote and advance the agenda?
- A multidimensional framework is developed for agenda setting, drawing on linear transformation models, layering, and collective impact to examine the contributions of community foundations to the formation of local college access agendas.
- Particular attention is paid to the horizontal alignment of partners within a community to address local challenges and vertical alignment of partners, programs, and resources at the local, regional, state, and even national levels.
- The findings illustrate that local agendas are influenced by both local pressures to adapt to the community context and state incentives and pressures to conform to a set of programmatic priorities. Those responsible for managing the change agenda must simultaneously be able to attend to both dimensions.

## Models of Social Change: Community Foundations and Agenda Setting

In the spring of 2005, Janice Brown, former superintendent of public schools in Kalamazoo, announced a simple promise to the students and parents of her district: If you attend Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) and earn your high school

diploma, the community will pay for your tuition and fees to attend any public two- or four-year institution in the state.

Two factors make the Promise simple and easy to understand. First, there are few conditions for eligibility. The award is scaled to the amount of time students attend KPS; a student must attend all four years of high school in the district to be eligible. Beyond that, a student is simply required to gain admission to a college and remain enrolled. The feature of the program few have been able to replicate is to offer the promise as the “first dollar” of aid that students receive. Simply put, KPS students are not required to qualify for other forms of financial aid – they do not even have to apply for federal student aid, as required by many other promise-type programs (Miller-Adams, 2008).

In the blink of an eye, the Kalamazoo Promise took the national spotlight as a model for community-based social change. Within the first few years of the program, community leaders from across the country flocked to observe firsthand how this midsized, Midwestern, Rust Belt town transformed itself from a declining 20th-century industrial city to a 21st-century magnet for economic growth in the new knowledge economy. Today hundreds of cities across the country have given the Promise serious consideration and more than a dozen have begun crafting their own versions. All have come to recognize two facts that community leaders in southwest Michigan under-

stood from the beginning of the Promise: It takes a long time to develop the agenda and it takes even longer to achieve long-term and sustainable success.

In this article, we examine alternative models for understanding how social change is facilitated. We focus our attention on a particular approach to large-scale, community-based educational change – Local College Access Networks (LCAN) in the state of Michigan – to answer two key questions: What factors serve to shape the social change agenda? How can community foundations serve to promote and advance the agenda? We examine these questions in the context of educational change within local communities, but the lessons are equally important for broader social change initiatives. The reader will note that we have taken great care to avoid using “collective” or “common” or “shared” to describe the agenda-setting process. In many ways these terms are synonyms. Currently, however, they connote particular approaches to structuring and understanding social change. In the case that we use any of these modifiers, we do so only in the most general sense of their meaning.

We argue that agenda setting is perhaps the most important aspect of the social change process and that the agenda evolves slowly. The Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), for example, has risen to great prominence among the education community; the U.S. Department of Education launched the Promise Neighborhood grant initiative to encourage other communities to engage in a similar transformation. We see the success of Geoffrey Canada today and we are tempted to believe that it has always been a model community-based education reform – when other community reformers consider HCZ, they only see the 99 city blocks of education reform and not the 20 years of slow and gradual improvement that preceded it. It may be an understatement to highlight that significant social change takes a great deal of time and cannot be replicated as easily as observers might hope.

It is also important to recognize that there is no one, unitary agenda. At some level, every individ-

ual and every organization has an agenda or a set of priorities or programmatic preferences. Each of these agendas is defined around a particular understanding of the problems their respective communities face and the potential solutions they bring to bear on the problem. Any social-change initiative must reconcile the challenge of assembling multiple, overlapping, and, at times, conflicting agendas to develop a shared understanding of both the problem and its possible solutions.

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The collective or shared agenda within a community may also be much larger than others observe at a distance. What educators from around the country see in Kalamazoo is an agenda to improve educational opportunity in an impoverished community. A number of those observers understand that it was designed as an economic development strategy to invest in the human-capital potential of the place and the appeal of the

TABLE 1: Models of Community-Based Social Change

|  | Nature of the Problem | Level of Change | Coordinator of Change  |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------|--|
| Linear Transformation Models                   | Simple or complicated | Local level     | Partner organizations  |
| Layering (Vertical Alignment)                  | Complicated, complex  | Multiple levels | Community foundation in collaboration with partners                          |
| Collective-Impact Model (Horizontal Alignment) | Complicated, complex  | Local level     | Backbone organization with guidance and support from community organizations |

city to prospective employers. What few people recognize outside of Michigan is that the Promise was only one of five pieces of a larger economic development strategy and that all of those pieces were critical both to the buy-in of partners and the outcomes ultimately achieved (Kitchens, Gross, & Smith, 2008).

In the next section, we examine current models of social change and discuss how they are understood and described. We conclude the section with a refined theory of social change that incorporates features of each model and provides a more thorough framework for understanding how the change process works in the context of LCANs. Next we discuss the methodology for the current investigation, situate it as part of a two-year formative evaluation project, and report our findings from both interviews and surveys collected from community foundations across Michigan. We conclude by considering the lessons learned for more than 40 communities already engaged in the formation of LCANs and the community foundations partnering with nearly all of them. We are careful not to suggest generalizability beyond our understanding of social change across LCAN communities, but features of the framework may be useful for understanding and navigating the change process in other states or across a range of other issues.

**Models of Social Innovation and Change**

In the recent social-change literature, there are at least three commonly utilized frameworks for

social change: logic models (linear transformation model), layering, and collective impact. Each model has strengths and limitations and they require that those initiating change consider three key questions as they begin the process of setting the agenda: What is the nature of the problem, at what level is change expected, and who is responsible for initiating the change? As Table 1 indicates, the models differ along these dimensions and different approaches may be necessary depending upon the circumstances. Kania and Kramer (2011) suggest that the sorts of problems typically addressed by foundations fall into three broad categories: simple, complicated, or complex. It is possible to identify problems that are simple to define and address, but we focus on strategies for problems that are either complicated or complex.

The linear transformation model (LTM) attempts to break complex problems down into their component parts by identifying how the designed intervention is likely to affect the near-term outputs and the longer-term outcomes and impacts, making problems simple. The LTM agenda-setting process focuses more narrowly on the linkage of resources to activities and activities to outputs and outcomes (Strickland, 2009), which may be more appropriate for simple or even complicated problems with a specific focus and clearly identifiable linkages between the activities and the expected outcomes. Linear models also describe the temporal dimension of change, recognizing that strategies evolve over time, as do

the structures to support change. The agenda for social change initiated as part of the LTM framework is set in collaboration among a small set of partners that frequently includes community foundations or private philanthropy. The agenda is typically managed by the organization promoting the change strategy and results are reported to funding partners or other sponsoring partners. In our estimation, the LTM is insufficient to address complex, multifaceted social issues. Neither the layering approach nor the collective-impact approach assumes that problems are so simple or that solutions are so tightly connected to intended outcomes. We recognize social problems are, by their very nature, complex and require more nuanced and comprehensive solutions. Both the layering and collective-impact models place agenda setting at the center, but they make different claims about how and by whom it is managed and sustained.

According to Kremers (2011), layering emphasizes vertical alignment of activities and funding sources, meaning that local agencies may align with state business leaders, which may also align with federal grant programs, as an example. From this perspective, each priority articulated as part of the community foundation strategic plan can be thought of both as part of a larger collective agenda for the community and an assembly of separate agendas that may require different partners both locally and at state, regional, or even national levels. The community foundation, as illustrated in Kremers (2011), manages the process of setting and sustaining the agenda by including partners, identifying resources, and building capacity to sustain the work long term. The vertical-alignment perspective highlights that community foundations serve to link the grassroots (local change agents) and the “grass tops” (local, state, and national leaders) in an active social-change process.

Collective impact, on the other hand, focuses primarily on horizontal alignment, dealing with the complex challenges within a given place and across the leadership of relevant agencies, organizations, and interest groups. At the heart of the collective-impact model is the establish-

ment of a common agenda, whereby all partners enter into collaboration and engage in consistent and sustained communication, particularly among principal leadership empowered to make decisions and commitments on behalf of their respective organizations (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). Agenda setting, from this perspective, takes a great deal of time and requires that partners commit to a process and potentially redefine the nature of the problem or array of solutions that will be brought to bear. Each partner may continue to maintain an organizational agenda broader than the agenda of the collective but are committed to the common agenda, both in principle and frequently in terms of dedicated resources. Where the community foundation is likely to operate at the center of the layering model, connecting people, ideas, and resources at various levels, collective impact argues that a separate backbone organization be established to manage the agenda, assuming that no single partner has the resources or the inclination to manage the process independent of their own broader agendas.

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Perhaps the greatest difference across the approaches is who assumes responsibility for establishing the change agenda and coordinating its activities. The LTM positions the activities at the center of the model, which are typically initiated by a community partner with some knowledge and expertise in a given area. Frumkin’s (2006) Theory of Leverage places greater emphasis on the linkage between resources and activities, but

activities remain central. The philanthropic organization may be a partner in the early conversations and may shape the direction of whatever strategy is chosen, but it is typically not at the center – the partnering agency assumes that role. In some cases, the community foundation will assume the coordination of these social-change initiatives, but the goal is frequently to move an initiative to self-sufficiency. The layering model assumes just the opposite in terms of who provides coordination. The foundation, by virtue of how it is positioned within the community and among a network of statewide partners, is frequently at the center of the social-change agenda and it seeks out partnerships to “layer” agendas and resources to maximize the potential impact of its collective strategies. Because the foundation has access to resources, it is in a position to leverage its grant dollars to bring in additional revenues from states, other foundations, or the federal government depending on the degree of overlap. This approach provides more flexibility for the foundation to identify partnerships and leverage resources because it is not predicated on establishing a common agenda, but rather on identifying the overlapping interests across separate agendas.

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Collective impact places the backbone organization at the center of the social-change model, which assumes responsibility for managing

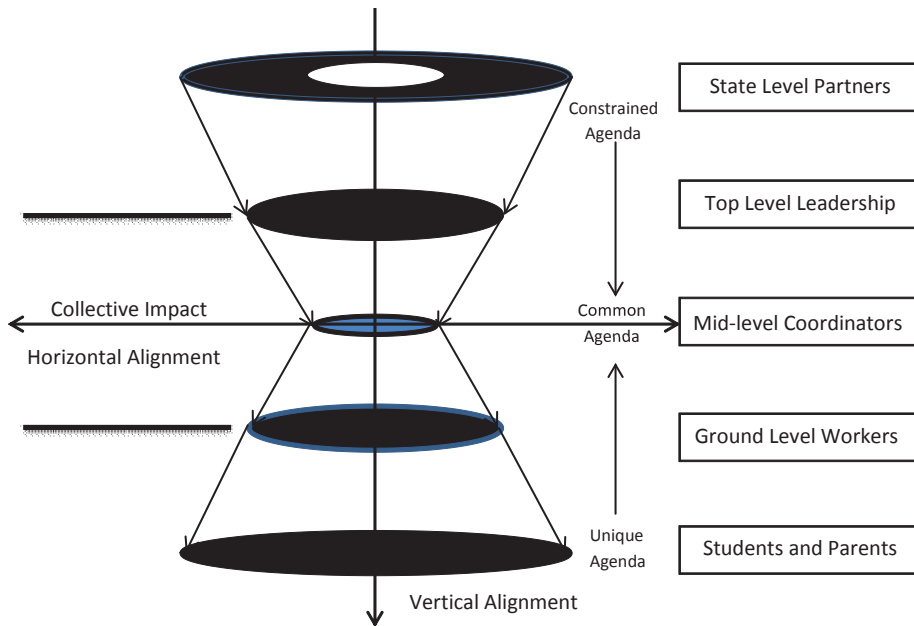
partners, ushering the common agenda under the guidance of partners, and providing administrative support for the array of partners involved in the project. As such, the community foundation serves as one of many key organizational partners in the collective-impact model. From this perspective, community foundations balance the priorities articulated in their own missions and strategic plans with those that evolve collectively among partners engaged in a dialogue regarding social change. The community foundation may play a central role in the collective-impact model, but it serves as one partner among many who are invested in the identified issue rather than the central organizing partner.

### **An Alternative Model for Social Change**

In this section, we describe a model that helps to situate the role of community foundations in the formation of a social-change agenda – in this case the college-access agenda. We draw upon both the horizontal alignment as described by the collective-impact framework and the layering model that emphasizes vertical alignment of agendas, partnerships, and resources. Our reformulated model suggests that community-based social change operates and is influenced by factors at five basic levels from individual students and parents up to state level actors. (See Figure 1.) Each level has an influence on activities at other levels and, in many cases, actors at one level will respond and adapt to the influences operating at another level. Layering helps us to understand the importance of integrating social change vertically, connecting actors at each level, and community foundations work in this way regularly.

Collective impact emphasizes horizontal alignment, focusing particularly on the establishment of a common agenda among principle partners in a defined geographic space. It is plausible to suggest that collective impact could apply for state or even national initiatives, but we focus specifically on collective impact as it is applied at a community level, which may range from a metropolitan center to a multicounty region. From this perspective, community foundations are one among multiple partners coming together to develop a common agenda that requires

FIGURE 1: Multi-Dimensional Model for Social Change



continuous communication, a long-term vision, mutually reinforcing activities, and a shared set of measurements. The longer-term perspective acknowledges that social change evolves over time and implies that the structure and function of a social-change initiative may similarly change as the common agenda evolves and partners clarify their relationship to the work.

The work of collective impact operates primarily within the middle three levels, where the principal leadership (CEO, superintendent, executive directors) commits to the work articulated as part of the common agenda and delegates or empowers mid-level staff (directors, assistant directors, program officers) to coordinate activities promoting change within the community. In smaller communities, mid-level staff may also operate as direct-service providers, but under other circumstances, program coordinators and those engaged in direct service operate at a level separate from the role of the mid-level coordinators. Figure 1 provides a framework for describing the multi-level nature of the collective-impact process. The figure suggests that the framing of a common

agenda typically occurs at level four (top level leadership) and the work occurs at levels two or three (mid-level coordination and ground-level work) depending upon the breadth and complexity of the change initiative. The model also recognizes that there are factors external to the collective-impact process that inform or constrain the establishment of the common agenda. For example, there are pressures from the state level (and arguably the federal level, though not pictured here) to focus on a set of common practices and metrics. State-level actors might include government agencies, state interest groups, or coordinating bodies. At the same time, students and parents and many local-level partners are encouraged to set the agenda to address the unique challenges and circumstances of their communities. At times, these agendas do not align well and those coordinating the social-change process assume the responsibility for aligning conflicting priorities to establish the shared agenda.

Figure 1 illustrates the unique position community foundations occupy as they support and influence the college-access agenda or attempt to

*The agenda-setting process must be understood as the intersection of a robust and sustained process to align community partners horizontally and the vertical alignment of complementary agendas at a variety of levels.*

coordinate a social-change agenda more broadly. Consistent with the collective-impact model, community foundations play a critical role in assembling key community leaders around a shared agenda. They serve as conveners within their local communities and they help to build capacity among partners to do the collective work. At the same time, community foundations work vertically to align the shared agenda of the community with state-level partners and resources at one end of the vertical spectrum with students, parents, and schools at the other end. It is through both horizontal and vertical alignment that community foundations create a shared agenda with their local partners while balancing the unique agendas from the community and the constrained agendas from statewide actors. As such, the primary challenge is to embrace the unique agenda emerging from community priorities and adapt to the opportunities and constraints introduced among local leaders and state priorities and initiatives.

These competing pressures complicate the process of establishing a common agenda. On the one hand, leadership at all levels recognizes that each community faces a unique set of challenges and can bring different assets and solutions to the table. On the other hand, state or even national initiatives may call for greater standardization of both the process and the solutions brought to bear on the problems, relying upon tested strategies they believe could be brought to scale, even

as the local contexts for the solution differ. As such, the agenda-setting process must be understood as the intersection of a robust and sustained process to align community partners horizontally and the vertical alignment of complementary agendas of local initiatives situated in a more complex system of priorities and initiatives at a variety of levels.

### Methodology

In order to examine how community foundations set an agenda for social change, we examine data from a formative evaluation of the role of community foundations in the development of Local College Access Networks (LCAN). This project has progressed in three phases. During the first phase, we conducted a set of focus groups with program officers and executive directors of community foundations partnering with LCANs. Two focus groups were conducted with 20 participants representing 12 community foundations across the state. Those focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify the roles community foundations play in their local college-access work. We used those early conversations to develop a logic model for linking the activities of community foundations with outcomes likely to influence the work of LCANs. In the second phase, we administered a survey to all community foundations across Michigan engaged in the work of their respective LCANs. At the time the survey was conducted, 38 community foundations were engaged in establishing or developing LCANs. The survey was written to examine how the findings from the focus groups could be generalized and to further refine our model to reflect the full array of community foundation participation in college-access work across the state. Participants were asked about their roles in local college-access work, the range of partners, and their assessment of an array of statewide initiatives intended to enhance and support the work of LCANs and the local community foundations.

The third phase of the investigation is still under way. Five communities across Michigan were identified as case-study sites for a more in-depth investigation of the work of community founda-



tions in support of their LCAN activities. The final phase of the investigation examines how community foundations engage with their local partners on a shared college-access agenda and how local contexts shape the work of community foundations in the establishment and evolution of LCANs. The five communities were selected to represent geographic distribution in the state, size of community served, and amount of time engaged in the process. All five case-study site visits were conducted in July and August 2012 and a total of 30 interviews were conducted with representatives from community foundations, LCAN organizing bodies, district and intermediate school district (ISD) educators, higher education partners, and local nonprofit organizations. In addition to the interviews, the research team gathered documents from LCAN partners describing their roles and successes and their grant applications for state-level support most LCANs received from the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) and the Kresge Foundation through the Council of Michigan Foundations.

We began the coding process for the interviews and open-ended responses to the questionnaire with a deductive approach, using the features of both collective impact and layering as lenses through which to examine how community foundations describe the agenda-setting process for their LCANs. We developed a two-level coding scheme where level 1 identified broad themes consistent with either vertical or horizontal alignment and level 2 identified the specific mechanisms by which influence is achieved along level-1 dimensions. We pay particular attention to how community foundations discuss agenda-setting horizontally across their local communities and vertically with partners at the local, state, regional, and national levels.

## Results

One of the realities for any large-scale social-change initiative is that the agenda is never set in isolation. The problems tend to be complex and an array of partners is already likely to be engaged in work related to or specifically addressing the issues under examination. In our interviews, we found several factors influenced how the agenda

was established and it may be useful to suggest that they fell into two broad categories – those emerging from the influences of local communities and others evolving at the state or regional level.

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### Local Influences on the Agenda

There were two basic mechanisms reported by community foundation representatives that underscored the important influences of the local community context on the college access agenda. First and most frequently cited, community foundations reported engaging in some form of needs assessment or community scan prior to the establishment of their LCAN and their college-access agenda. As one foundation noted,

...one of the most difficult things we did very early on was a very deep community scan on what was already happening. So wow we did not know that the YMCA was doing after school tutoring, and we did not know that [local organization] was running this program where they were taking kids to college campuses.

With some exceptions, community foundations reported that they included college access as part of their education agenda because their environmental scans and asset-mapping processes led them to conclude that it was an issue of tremendous importance; they were in a position to align existing work to build a collective strategy. Two

*Every participating community foundation was able to link the emerging college-access agenda with either existing or evolving local priorities.*

additional themes were identified by community foundations. First, as one rural community noted, less formal networking conversations with key civic leaders across their service region about key issues were critical to developing consensus around college access.

Second, two community foundations discussed the influence of existing work in the community on the college-access agenda. One recognized work the community foundation had already begun funding within their region. A foundation representative noted, "College access as far as I'm concerned really started probably in some conversations we had with [a grantee] with community schools in [a local community] before we knew anything about college access at all." This group had already received state-level funding to engage in college-access related work and the community foundation recognized the alignment of this work with their evolving education priorities.

Another community foundation recognized the alignment of the emerging college-access work in the state with an existing strand of their mission. A community foundation representative recalled,

...we have a youth pillar, and that youth pillar was really looking for a place where they could kind of put their hands around, something that would truly make a sustainable difference for our youth and give them an opportunity to have that place where they could find sustainable wages and all of those things.

The commonality across these experiences is that every participating community foundation was able to link the emerging college-access agenda with either existing or evolving local priorities. Of

course, we had only spoken to communities who chose to establish LCANs, so it is plausible that communities that choose not to launch LCANs were not able to establish the same clear linkages to existing local conditions.

#### *Statewide Influences on the Agenda*

The most commonly cited factor influencing the early formation of a local college-access agenda was the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise in 2005. Our interviews suggest that the successes in Kalamazoo were influential in two ways. For the earliest communities to establish LCANs, their charge was to find a way to replicate the program:

...I do remember when I first came here that was like, okay, what you need to do is build us an endowment, big enough for us to be able to do what they are doing. And so the focus started with fundraising, but what we very quickly found out talking to people in Kalamazoo, talking to some local people that have done things like adopt classrooms, was that it is not the money, the money is out there. It is connecting the kids to the money and keeping them on the path along the way.

In all three communities that began setting a college-access agenda prior to the establishment of Michigan College Access Network (MCAN), the statewide college-access network, the initial response was to create a Promise-type program, which was quickly followed by the realization that the community could not afford anything similar to what Kalamazoo had launched. In every case, organizers expressed the importance of that event as a way to catalyze local interest in education and more specifically the transition from high school to college. The second influence of Kalamazoo was less direct. Within three years of Kalamazoo's launch of the Promise program, MCAN was formed and Michigan passed legislation to create 10 promise zones across the state. Both initiatives were informed by the success of the place-based strategy in Kalamazoo and they created economic incentives for communities to participate in college-access work. MCAN launched several grant initiatives, first with money from the federal College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) and

later with support from the state of Michigan.

Money is a powerful motivator and communities have responded. In four of five cases, the opportunity to apply for external funds was a powerful motivating factor, but was always cited as secondary to the local factors discussed above. No one suggested that the availability of grant funding was the motivation for pursuing a college-access agenda, but they were clear that it provided an incentive. As one board member noted:

... Right about that time we were hearing about the college access network and opportunity to apply for grants and get a network up and running locally. So it just felt right. We were between projects and we needed something to really grasp onto, and so the college access network was that answer.

The most influential of these grant programs, from a community foundation perspective, was the Kresge Foundation-sponsored college access challenge grants. That initiative includes two rounds of funding for community foundations working with their LCAN. Phase 1 ranges from a \$25,000 to a \$50,000 dollar-for-dollar matching grant (depending on the size of the community foundation) to incentivize community foundations to be involved in their community college-access agenda. Phase 2 is a dollar-for-dollar challenge grant of up to \$15,000 to encourage community foundations to continue their leadership role and help address the sustainability of the LCAN efforts. Both phases of funding require 20 percent of the matching dollars to be new money into the community foundation and 20 percent of the total funds to be committed to an endowment fund at the community foundation for college-access activities.

Monetary incentives have been identified as effective motivators at different points along the agenda-setting process. MCAN has three separate grant competitions – planning, startup, and collective impact – and with the exception of the latter, they have been cited as effective tools for building the capacity to pursue college access within local communities. The one influence we expected to find but that never emerged was the

influence of the statewide commission on higher education and economic growth (Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, 2004). One of the key recommendations in the report called for the creation of local compacts to identify local solutions and leverage local assets to double the number of college graduates in the state. MCAN was directly influenced by this recommendation, but none of the communities mentioned it.

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#### *Community Foundation's Roles Setting the Agenda*

In an earlier paper (Daun-Barnett & Lamm, 2012), we found that community foundation representatives described their roles in the LCAN in terms of setting the agenda, developing capacity, identifying resources, serving as the fiduciary agent, and convening partners. At that time, we had used collective impact as a framework to examine the roles community foundations assumed in the creation and establishment of LCANs.

Our analyses suggested that community foundations commonly assumed many of the roles that might otherwise be attributed to a “backbone organization” as defined by Kania and Kramer.

*All have implied the importance of both top-level involvement in the commitment of the organization to the shared college-access agenda, as well as the critical nature of a coordinating function delegated to staff of one or more participating organizations.*

A backbone organization is an organization that is separate from those participating in collective impact, with a dedicated staff whose main responsibility is to move the work of the group forward through ongoing facilitation, technology and communication support, data collection and reporting, and the handling of logistical and administration details. However, we recognized that the backbone organization in the collective-impact framework was inadequate to fully appreciate how community foundations influenced the work of their LCANs. It is clear that community foundations were instrumental and continue to play a critical role in terms of the horizontal alignment of community partners and existing local resources. In this phase of the investigation, we have found that local partners report similar contributions from their community foundations to the work of the LCANs. We have also found, however, that their role is much more nuanced and requires a consideration of both horizontal and vertical alignment, which we adapt from the layering model articulated by Kremers (2011).

#### *The Coordinating Function*

The collective-impact model suggests that effective collaboration begins with active engagement among the top leadership across key partner organizations. Participants in this investigation recognize the value of top-level support, but they argue that it may not even be the most important part of the collaborative framework. One foundation participant summarized,

I recognize the fact that the best practice would tell us, we should have the CEO and the president of all the organizations involved on a board. Then we should have second ... the people who do the work on a second level. That has not quite been the way that we have worked. Like [our CEO], I would not expect him to come to [a steering committee] meeting because he has got other stuff to do. So it has been like [we] spend more with the second-level people that have been in leadership.

In three of five communities, we found that this sort of verticality has emerged as the organizing structure has been formalized. The degree to which multiple levels (principal decision makers and coordinators) have been formally acknowledged by participants varies by community but all have implied the importance of both top-level involvement in the commitment of the organization to the shared college-access agenda, as well as the critical nature of a coordinating function delegated to staff of one or more participating organizations. In the earlier paper, the authors note that LCANs have not established separate backbone organizations, but as we investigate further it has become clear the emergence of these two levels has effectively appointed the level-3 coordinators as the steering committee, which operates much like a backbone organization. Instead of each organization contributing money to support this function, many of the organizations are effectively donating staff time to the operations of this necessary committee.

In our reformulated model, we map both horizontal and vertical alignment and suggest that collective impact is best understood both in terms of horizontal alignment of partners and vertical alignment of complementary roles. To this point we have discussed the role of the principal leadership (level 2) and coordinators (level 3), but we found in several of the larger communities that there is a layer of service providers (level 4) that is independent from the coordinators. All three of these layers are critical to the success of a collective-impact strategy. At the same time, their roles and responsibilities are intertwined, meaning that we cannot think only of horizontal alignment if we hope to understand how the agenda is established

and ultimately accomplished. As another participant noted,

You would have some top persons [with] no clue what was going on in the world, you know, no clue how many other efforts are out there. Keeping those people just informed in general that arts and culture are important, education is important, our waterfront is important, and they are all economic development. I think that is where level ones just need to have that kind of buy-in, but stay out of the way or the people going to get [the work done].

As we extend our model to examine both horizontal and vertical alignment, it is clear that the environmental scans and asset mapping served to align the agenda of the LCAN with the grassroots expectations of community members. In each case, the process was initiated by the community foundations or their partners. We have found in our interviews with direct-service providers that aligning the work of the LCAN with community expectations is an ongoing activity at the intersection of what may be level 4 and level 5 (students and parents receiving services) in the model. The perspective of the level-4 service provider is critical to understanding how communities connect their agendas with the expectations of those they intend to serve. The key then, is to connect what is learned at levels 3 and 4 to the coordination and decision making that occurs at levels 1 and 2.

In addition to recognizing the verticality inherent in the work that occurs at the local level, one of the key linkages is between the activities at the local level and the range of policy and programmatic priorities of different interest groups at the state and federal levels. We mentioned earlier the importance of state developments like the Kalamazoo Promise, promise zones, and the statewide higher education commission, but here we focus on the relationship between local leadership and state agencies. Three organizations have played a critical role in the establishment of the LCAN strategy in Michigan – MCAN, the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF), and the Kresge Foundation – and community foundations have served as conduits for many of these activities. Interviewees consistently identify all three of these

organizations as key to either establishing their local agendas or expanding their efforts. They are also quick to recognize that each of these three agencies have established agendas, which in some ways have been integrated through collaboration.

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All three organizations are invested in the idea that local communities must develop strategies tailored to their own unique circumstances, but they differ in terms of how they influence local agendas. Both MCAN and CMF have chosen to influence local communities through their grantmaking activities. MCAN sponsors three grant programs sequenced to move communities from the planning stages to a more intentionally designed collective-impact model for community change. The planning grant requires that prospective communities utilize the funding to meet 11 criteria for future funding – all of which focus on a particular process for developing their local change agendas (Michigan College Access Network, 2012). The Start-Up Grant sets similar expectations for deliverables by the end of the one-year grant period and it includes implementation of several state-level tools including a social marketing campaign (Know How 2 Go) and a college-access web portal.

The Kresge challenge grants are designed to create an incentive for community foundations to engage in their LCANs and the tradeoff is similar to those tied to the MCAN grants. On one hand,

*The consequence is that state-level priorities impose constraints on the local agenda that make it difficult to respond solely to the unique circumstances facing each community.*

the funding makes it possible for many local initiatives to engage and sustain their work. On the other hand, it requires partners to set agendas in a particular way. As a condition of receiving a challenge grant, community foundations must have established partnerships with an LCAN that has already received the MCAN planning or startup grant (Council of Michigan Foundations, 2012).

For those that choose to participate in these grant competitions, the criteria either align well with their local agendas or are not overly burdensome to prevent them from seeking the support. The only program that appears to have raised some concerns among participants is the Collective Impact Grant competition sponsored by MCAN. It is the most proscriptive of the grant competitions and it requires that participating communities use the FSG collective-impact model to advance their college-access work. We spoke with representatives from two communities participating in the collective-impact grants and the following comment summarizes what we heard about the manner in which the model is implemented:

... If you come in and you think you know all the answers ... I am telling you right now, don't do it. ... Don't come to us and tell us and [our organization] we are wrong about college access. That is a bad approach. Come and listen and try to gain insights and learn.

It was difficult to assess the degree to which the concerns reflected the proscriptive nature of the

grant application or the manner in which the consultants presented the model to participating communities. Even with these concerns, participants note the critical role played by all three organizations in their college-access work, both in terms of funding and technical support. Several go as far as to suggest that their work would not be possible without these state-level actors. The consequence is that state-level priorities impose constraints on the local agenda that make it difficult to respond solely to the unique circumstances facing each community. For all of the participants in this study, the modest tradeoffs of agenda-setting autonomy were well worth the support they received to develop and sustain their work.

### Conclusion

College access is a complex problem requiring solutions equal to the task. Community foundations play a critical role setting an agenda for social change in their respective communities and they are situated at the intersection of broad coalitions of partners within their communities and the layers of partners and funding sources regionally, statewide, and in some cases across the nation. It is as much art as science to be able to balance competing priorities driving locally derived strategies for change with standardized alternatives advocated across the state. Other partners play a role in vertical alignment as well but none of them connect as consistently as the community foundations in our investigation.

In this article we make two important contributions to our understanding of how social-change agendas are formed and managed. First, we illustrate the importance of both horizontal and vertical alignment to the success of any initiative as broad and complex as college access. Second, we show how complex the agenda-setting process can be, even when focusing on social change in local communities. Perhaps most important, the juxtaposition of collective impact (horizontal alignment) with layering (vertical alignment) provide an opportunity to think differently about how to formalize the organizing structure to manage social change in communities. Collective impact suggests that a separate backbone

organization is necessary, but our analysis suggests that by activating involvement at multiple levels within a community, principal leadership can empower others within their organizations to provide the structure and support the social-change process requires. Future studies should focus greater attention on how communities differ in how they develop their unique strategies, how community foundations have successfully influenced the establishment and development of their LCANs and the college-access agenda in the state of Michigan, and what lessons can be more broadly applied to other community and state contexts.

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