

The Foundation Review

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Open Access*

2012

Using Civic Engagement and Collaboration to Create Community Change: Lessons From Charlotte, N.C.

Joanne G. Carman
University of North Carolina-Charlotte

Rebecca A. Hefner
University of North Carolina-Charlotte

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carman, J. G., & Hefner, R. A. (2012). Using Civic Engagement and Collaboration to Create Community Change: Lessons From Charlotte, N.C.. *The Foundation Review*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.4087/FOUNDATIONREVIEW-D-12-00002.1>

Copyright © 2012 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

RESULTS

Using Civic Engagement and Collaboration to Create Community Change: Lessons From Charlotte, N.C.

Joanne G. Carman, Ph.D., and Rebecca A. Hefner, M.P.A., University of North Carolina-Charlotte

Keywords: Civic engagement, cross-sector collaboration, philanthropic failure, process evaluation

Key Points

- The city of Charlotte, N.C. undertook a deliberative democracy process using the AmericaSpeaks “21st Century Town Meeting” process.
- The University of North Carolina-Charlotte performed a retrospective, process evaluation of the initiative examining the initiative’s components, coverage, participant feedback, short-term outcomes, and lessons learned.
- Early planning and implementation was done by volunteers, which ultimately was not sustainable. A new center, housed within an existing organization, was created to implement the recommendations.
- The initiative achieved a number of early successes, such as increasing the number of school nurses, expansion of an early childhood development program and an increase in after-school and summer programs for youth.
- While the center continues to provide services, the broad public awareness and ongoing public participation was challenging to sustain.

One way that foundations have tried to address community-level problems is by facilitating cross-sector collaborations between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. In this article, we examine one community’s effort to use a large-scale civic engagement process to create community-level changes to improve the health, safety, and education of children. In doing so, we describe the challenges that foundations can face in trying to sustain a cross-sector collaborative process

while working to produce highly visible outcomes in a relatively short period of time. The findings from this study illustrate important lessons for foundations that are funding and leading cross-sector collaborative efforts – lessons related to the importance of communication and transparency, the need for shared leadership, the limits to voluntary collaboration, and the need for a sustainable structure to maintain the commitment and effort over time.

Literature Review

Cross-sector collaboration among government, the private sector, foundations, and nonprofits to pursue community change is not new, but it is growing (Yankey & Willen, 2010), in part because there is an assumption that collaborative efforts can do more with less (Emshoff et al., 2007). Yet, as Lasker, Weiss and Miller (2001) note, “Because collaboration requires relationships, procedures, and structures that are quite different from the ways that many people and organizations have worked in the past, building effective partnerships is time consuming, resource intensive, and very difficult” (p. 180). Moreover, power differentials, resource dependencies, capacity, and trust issues among the different collaborators put these types of efforts at risk for failure (Fairfield & Wing, 2008; Gazley, 2010).

Community change efforts led by foundations, some would say, are even more at risk given the unique roles foundations play in society as social innovators, conveners, and change agents (Anheier, 2005; Carman, 2001; Green & Haines,

2012). Compared with government, there are fewer expectations related to representativeness, transparency, and accountability (Lenkowsky, 2002; Ostrower, 2007; Skocpol, 1999). And, as Brown and Fiester (2007) describe, community change work can be challenging for foundations because “some will find the work too messy, politically charged, and/or hard to assess” (p. 74). In addition, “without the right supports applied in sufficient amounts, even a well-framed, effectively managed, and accurately measured initiative may fail” (p. 44).

Salamon (1995) describes four risks associated with philanthropic failure that could affect cross-sector collaborative efforts being led by foundations. Philanthropic paternalism refers to the likelihood that those who have the most resources, such as foundations, inevitably will yield the most power (p. 47; Skocpol, 1999). Philanthropic particularism has to do with the tendency for the voluntary sector to provide services to particular sub-groups of the population based upon its interests and preferences; the result can be gaps in coverage or duplication of services (Salamon, 1995, p. 46). Philanthropic amateurism refers to the historical tradition of providing for community needs through the efforts of private citizens who volunteer to help for moral or religious reasons (Salamon, 1995, p. 48). Philanthropic insufficiency has to do with the voluntary sector’s “inability to generate resources on a scale that is both adequate and reliable enough to cope with the human service problems of an advanced industrial society” (Salamon, 1995, p. 45). In spite of these risks for philanthropic failure, Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006) maintain that cross-sector collaborative efforts among government agencies, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and foundations should help to jointly achieve outcomes that would not be realized if the sectors were working separately (p. 44).

Context for the Study

In the last 20 years, foundations, as well as government agencies, have tried to be more deliberative in their approach to community-level work by embracing community visioning,

strategic planning, and other strategies designed to engage citizens, capture their input, and foster consensus and collaboration (Abelson et al., 2003; Bonds & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Eichler, 2007; Nabatchi, 2010). According to Weeks (2000), the deliberative democracy approach to civic engagement focuses on “eliciting broad public participation in a process which provides citizens an opportunity to consider the issues, weigh alternatives, and express a judgment about which policy or which candidate is preferred” (p. 360). This approach to civic engagement has gained wide use and popular recognition (Button & Mattson, 1999; Grogan & Gusmano, 2005; Hendriks, 2005), especially in the last decade, through the high-profile work of AmericaSpeaks, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to engaging citizens in governance.

The United Agenda for Children was a civic engagement initiative that used the 21st Century Town Meeting model to create a community vision and shared action plan to ensure that all children in North Carolina’s Mecklenburg County were healthy, safe, and well educated.

AmericaSpeaks created a “21st Century Town Meeting”[®] to engage citizens, promote dialogue, and inform decision makers (AmericaSpeaks, 2010). The 21st Century Town Meeting involves convening a large, demographically representative group of citizens at a town hall meeting, where the participants engage in small-group, facilitated discussions and use laptops and keypads to express their opinions in response to a series of questions. The data are analyzed and presented back to the group and later disseminated out to the broader community (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002). According to AmericaSpeaks (2010), the goal of the 21st Century Town

Meeting is to create “engaging, meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision making” (para. 1).

The United Agenda for Children was a civic engagement initiative that used the 21st Century Town Meeting model to create a community vision and shared action plan to ensure that all children in North Carolina’s Mecklenburg County were healthy, safe, and well educated. From 2004 through 2008, a coalition of citizens, civic leaders, corporations, public entities, and community agencies worked to identify a set of community priorities for children, examine the research about best community practices, and create a sustainable structure to support and maximize the impact of providers, agencies, and funders working on behalf of children.

In an effort to document and learn from the experiences of the United Agenda for Children, the Council for Children’s Rights (CFCR) contracted with the University of North Carolina-Charlotte to perform a retrospective, process evaluation of the initiative for \$25,000. The process evaluation involved examining the initiative’s components (operations at each stage), coverage (who participated), participant feedback (how well did the initiative meet participant expectations), short-term outcomes (results), and lessons learned.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a variety of methods. First, we reviewed the program documentation recorded during the initiative. These documents included notes, minutes from meetings, white papers, reports, presentations, and budgetary information. Second, we consulted with funders and the staff of CFCR to create an initial list of key stakeholders to interview. Then, we used snowball sampling – asking the stakeholders to identify others who were key participants in the initiative – to increase our sample of interviewees.

Interviews were conducted with 40 key stakeholders involved in the initiative, including the foundations and conveners of the initiative

(13); representatives of service providers (13), government agencies (5), and the private sector (4); and other community leaders and citizens (5) who participated in the initiative. The interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol consisting of 11 questions. The questions were designed to explore the context of the initiative, examine the role of each of the participants, identify key moments and important decisions, and assess the outcomes and accomplishments of the initiative. Typically, the interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed. We used an inductive approach to coding the data, allowing the codes and themes to emerge from the data, as opposed to using a preconceived coding framework (Caudle, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In an effort to gather additional information from more of the town hall participants, we conducted an online survey. We used the master list of participants as our sampling frame; on this list, we had email or mailing addresses for 675 of the participants. We were able to contact 277 of the participants by email to invite them to respond to the survey. We sent a postcard to the remaining 398 participants to invite them to respond; 87 postcards were returned because the mailing address was no longer valid. Of the 588 participants we were able to contact by email or mail, 58 (10 percent) completed the survey.

We also conducted a follow-up focus group to gather more detailed information about the participants’ experiences with the United Agenda for Children. Seven survey respondents participated in the focus group; their input was recorded and transcribed. We again used an inductive approach to coding the data, allowing the codes and themes to emerge from the data (Caudle, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). (See Appendix.)

United Agenda for Children: Three Phases of Implementation

According to the data we gathered, the initiative unfolded in three distinct phases. The first phase focused on community engagement and hosting

the town hall meeting. The second phase focused on implementing the ideas and priorities that came from the meeting. The third phase focused on efforts to sustain the initiative and its efforts.

Phase 1: Community Engagement

The United Agenda for Children was convened by a nonprofit consulting group after several staff members participated in the AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting for the Ground Zero redesign in New York City in 2002. Staff reported that the event was “transformational,” and they wanted to bring the model to Charlotte. After initial meetings with community leaders, funders, and stakeholders, the consulting firm crafted a concept paper proposing to use the AmericaSpeaks model to create a well-planned, specific public-policy agenda and work plan for the major issues that impact children and youth in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The hope was that the deliberative, consensus-building approach of the AmericaSpeaks model would really “bring a vision to the table.”

The focus on children and youth came about for a number of reasons. First, Charlotte had a long history of pursuing community initiatives focused on children and youth. In the program documentation, we found reports where the organizers reviewed more than 20 community initiatives focused on the children and youth of Charlotte. The overall success of these initiatives was described as “mixed,” with the weaknesses being described in terms of a lack of capacity, a lack of coordination, key stakeholders missing from the table, and few results. Second, according to interview data we gathered, there was a consensus among the initiative’s initial organizers that Charlotte needed to look more broadly at the needs of children and improve the connections between the schools and the children’s service providers. Third, the focus on children and youth was described as being the “right issue for the time,” in that there was an increasing focus in the community on the need for coordination within the children’s services sector.

Fundraising for the initiative was spearheaded by the consulting firm and the community foundation which put together a collaborative

group of foundations, private corporations, and public agencies. When we asked how this came about, the conveners said “we basically went out and just began to ask for money.” After two years of planning and fundraising, the United Agenda for Children town hall meeting was held in Charlotte, N.C. on December 11, 2004. Approximately 1,000 residents participated in the event, where they engaged in facilitated, small-group discussions that led to a list of 14 community priorities to address the health, safety, and education of children (see Table 1).

We found reports where the organizers reviewed more than 20 community initiatives focused on the children and youth of Charlotte. The overall success of these initiatives was described as “mixed,” with the weaknesses being described in terms of a lack of capacity, a lack of coordination, key stakeholders missing from the table, and few results.

Phase II: Implementation

Following the town hall meeting, the United Agenda for Children moved into Phase II, an implementation period lasting from January 2005 to March 2007. The challenge during this phase was to harness the energy from the town hall event and move forward with the community priorities that had been identified at the meeting. A steering committee, chaired by a foundation representative, was created to lead Phase II. There were 36 volunteer members on the steering committee. Nine of those members (25 percent) came from the philanthropic community and represented four corporate funders, a community foundation, a national foundation with a local

TABLE 1 14 Priorities From the United Agenda for Children Town Hall Event

14 Priorities From the United Agenda for Children Town Hall Event	
Priorities in health	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide health care services where the children are: home, school, day care. 2. Increase school resources for health care services, especially school nurses. 3. Implement universal health care. 4. Coordinate services among providers, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based organizations. 5. Increase healthy programs in schools.
Priorities in safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare parents for parenting and hold them accountable for child safety. 2. Increase after-school and out-of-school activities. 3. Increase quality, quantity, and accessibility of child care and day care options. 4. Employer support for child care options, school visits, and mentoring.
Priorities in education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Require higher standards and provide better pay for teachers and assistants, including mentoring programs. 2. Expand and improve facilities – smaller classrooms and better student-teacher ratios. 3. Improve communication between parents and teachers. 4. Expand Bright Beginnings; take it into community sites. 5. Add more mentoring programs for students.

presence, and a United Way affiliate. The rest of the steering committee members represented youth (22 percent), the private sector (20 percent), nonprofit and faith-based organizations (17 percent), schools (8 percent), and local government (8 percent).

The steering committee members volunteered to serve on one of three subcommittees representing the three issue areas: health, safety, and education. These subcommittees later expanded to include other residents, elected officials, foundation staff, business leaders, community advocates, university and school representatives, faith-based organizations, and government and nonprofit agencies. A youth advisory council was also formed to create opportunities for youth to stay engaged in the process, and a number of other ad-hoc committees were created as needed.

The purpose of the volunteer committees was to gather information and develop strategies for making changes to improve the health, safety, and education of children. The committees produced a set of white papers that described the latest research and offered recommendations for best practices in the areas of health, parenting, out-of-school time, early child care, and mentoring. Yet, as this work evolved to be more focused on outcomes, the representatives on the committees

recognized that the voluntary process would need to be replaced with a more permanent structure in order to sustain the work over time.

In June 2006, a two-day retreat was convened to discuss the future of the United Agenda for Children. Among the 38 participants were representatives from nonprofit organizations (50 percent), government (24 percent), the private sector (10 percent), foundations (8 percent), youth (5 percent), and schools (3 percent). The participants reflected on the accomplishments and lessons learned from the initiative, and they worked in teams to suggest different models for how to move the collaborative work forward when the funding ended at the end of the year. Seven models were submitted, each with varying degrees of community representation, membership, and decision-making authority. At the end of the retreat, a committee was charged with the task of developing a collaborative structure that would reflect goals and discussion from the retreat. The structure committee met monthly for six months and tried to identify the “right” collaborative model. After trying to conduct their own research into different models, they eventually concluded that they needed more in-depth, systematic research and they needed to gather greater community input in order to make a more informed choice. In December 2006, the

structure committee asked the foundations to fund the creation of a design team that would be charged with conducting this research.

Phase III: Sustainability

In May 2007, a design team was formed, comprised of nine members from the community, with three representatives from foundations, three representatives from local government, and one representative each from the school system, the United Way, and a nonprofit organization. The design team received research support from a national consulting firm and a local project management team. It began work by consulting with national field experts about community intermediaries and support organizations, and conducted research into best practices. Team members identified and reviewed the models of 55 organizations that support collaborative efforts for communitywide change. While most of those were private, nonprofit organizations, some were public- and private-sector partnerships, public organizations, or United Way agencies.

Next, the design team conducted more detailed research on 11 of those organizations, and then narrowed its focus to examine four organizations that focused on playing a “connector role” in their communities. These were also organizations with strong records of accomplishment and organizations that used data and research to drive their priorities. The design team also looked at the governance structures, budget information, programming, and measures of success used by the organizations.

In an effort to get additional information and feedback about what type of structure might be a good fit for the community, the design team conducted five focus groups and 26 interviews with nonprofits (staff and board members), public agencies, and other community partners including foundations, churches, and media outlets. The design team then used this information to develop a proposal that called for creating a Children’s Intermediary Organization (CIO) as the sustainable structure for moving forward with the work of the United Agenda for Children.

According to the proposal, the CIO would serve as a catalyst for change, and engage in four key roles: strategic planning, public relations and awareness, research and evaluation, and public policy and advocacy efforts. The design team also recommended that the CIO be housed within an existing organization rather than creating a new organization because there was concern among both nonprofit organizations and funders that a new organization would only create more competition for resources. The Council for Children’s Rights was selected because the design team believed they had the best fit in terms of “mission, leadership, and alignment.”

The design team also recommended that the CIO be housed within an existing organization rather than creating a new organization because there was concern among both nonprofit organizations and funders that a new organization would only create more competition for resources.

In 2009, the Council for Children’s Rights (CFCR) received a three-year grant of \$1.5 million to create The Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures (named for the former director of CFCR, who was a strong community advocate for youth). A staff of four was hired and the center was launched in September 2009 as a community resource working at the strategic level to maximize “the effectiveness and impact of work being done for children by providers, agencies, and funders” (Council for Children’s Rights, 2011, para. 2). Today, The Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures is working to provide four community needs: community engagement, community planning, public-policy advocacy, and

research and evaluation. It is currently focused on three priorities: improving school readiness, reducing child abuse and neglect, and increasing access to physical and mental health care (Council for Children's Rights, 2011, para. 3).

Many of the participants who responded to the survey and all of the focus group participants indicated that while they enjoyed the town hall, they wondered what happened afterward.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed that while United Agenda for Children achieved many short-term outcomes, the process of the initiative and the way it unfolded offers many insights for foundations interested in learning about successful cross-sector collaboration, including: the importance of communication and transparency, the need for shared leadership, the limits to voluntary efforts, and the challenge of sustainability.

Outcomes

The United Agenda for Children achieved a number of outcomes early on in the initiative. The first was increased county funding for school nurses, one of the first priorities to emerge from the town hall meeting. The second was the expansion of an early childhood development program and an increase in after-school and summer programs for youth (other priorities from the town hall). The third outcome was greater education and awareness about the status and needs of children, achieved through the collaborative production of a series of white papers. More than 65 community experts contributed to the white papers, which described the latest research and offered recommendations for best practices in the areas of health, parenting,

out-of-school time, early childcare, and mentoring.

Many of the stakeholders identified some of the more qualitative benefits from this phase of the initiative, including closer working relationships with specific service providers and improved relationships with the school system. Minutes and summary reports in the program documentation also describe greater collaboration between agencies, more communication, and improved connections between the education and mental health systems. Also, the local community foundation used the community priorities to inform their grantmaking activities, and several service providers described how they used the community priorities in their funding appeals to foundations, government, and individual donors. Finally, by creating The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures, the community now has the capacity to work on creating community-level changes in the lives of children and youth.

Process

The United Agenda for Children also illustrates the complexity and challenges of managing collaborative civic-engagement efforts, especially as it relates to communication and transparency, shared leadership, and sustained commitment. For example, the United Agenda for Children's town hall event convened a large and diverse group of citizens. In fact, the AmericaSpeaks model involves an outreach and recruitment campaign for the event as well as efforts to work closely with the media to ensure that the public is informed about the civic-engagement project. In Charlotte, the town hall event received a considerable amount of media attention, with front-page and ongoing coverage from *The Charlotte Observer* and broad coverage of the event itself from newspaper, radio, and major television networks. Outreach was conducted in both Spanish and English, and translators were on site during the town hall event.

After the event, however, there was comparably little coverage of the initiative's activities in Phase II and few efforts were made to maintain the broad public engagement that characterized the

town hall meeting. Most of the key stakeholders we interviewed acknowledged that as the committees moved forward with their work in Phase II, they could have maintained better communication with the people who were initially engaged in the United Agenda for Children. As one of the committee members explained to us, "One of the areas that we could have done a better job ... was [at] every step of the way of progress doing a much better job of educating, following-up, and updating the community on what was going on." Similarly, many of the participants who responded to the survey and all of the focus group participants indicated that while they enjoyed the town hall event, they wondered what happened afterward. Some reported that while they had hoped to be included in the later phases of the initiative, they weren't invited to participate. As one woman explained, "I got the survey results But nothing else ever came out. Nothing came out in the newspaper. Nothing came out in the communities." Moreover, most were not aware of the existence of The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures, much less its connection to the United Agenda for Children.

For some, this lack of communication in Phase II was perceived as exclusionary and contributed to a sense that the United Agenda for Children was being "driven" by the foundations. As one provider noted, "Every once in a while we would hear a report back, and then it went back to this mysterious group that had all this power and control." Another said, "It was like the United Agenda for Children belonged to the people from the [foundation name]."

In analyzing how the initiative unfolded, it was clear that the foundations began to play a larger role in June 2006 following the retreat that was held to discuss the sustainability of the collaborative work. For example, according to the meeting minutes and the interviews we conducted, the chairperson of the structure committee was meeting with funders in between the meetings to brief them about the committee's activities and cultivate their support to continuing to fund the work. At the same time, the funders were discussing the possibility of creating a pool of public and private funds that could be used

continue to support the work associated with the United Agenda for Children. In addition, the structure committee and the design team were making presentations directly to the funders once the United Agenda for Children ended in March 2007.

In reflecting upon this period, one of the foundation leaders described how some service providers probably "feel like we kept them in the dark for a while." During the structure and design phases, some of the stakeholders, including some of the nonprofit service providers, disengaged from the process. As one service provider explained, "It seemed like [the design phase] went on, away from us, long enough for us to go on and do other things." Another service provider explained that "there was a lot of energy put into [the white papers] ... but over time, the energy that was there in December of '04, with that group, just waned." Other stakeholders, particularly key representatives from the school system and a local government agency, were participating less due to leadership transitions.

The activities and findings of the structure committee and the design team were also not shared with the larger group of stakeholders. As a result, many of the key stakeholders that we interviewed did not understand how the creation of The Larry King Center was even connected to the work of the United Agenda for Children. The planning and development of the center was negotiated primarily during internal meetings between the Council for Children's Rights, a collaborative group of funders, and the design team. Plans for the center were not shared with the original participants and stakeholders of the United Agenda for Children until the center's official launch in 2009. This lack of communication and transparency in Phase III resulted in a lack of knowledge about The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures and a lack of understanding of its role in the community.

Shared Leadership

At first, the consulting firm that spearheaded the initiative was the clear leader, playing the role of facilitator and convener, but other participants

were viewed as being important as well. For example, one community resident was identified as being instrumental in securing the increased funding for school nurses, the most commonly recognized outcome of the United Agenda for Children. One of the foundation leaders was identified as being a particularly good facilitator, while another foundation leader was credited with giving the initiative high visibility. A committee leader was also identified as being very instrumental in shaping the work of the design team.

Throughout the interviews, we heard the participants talk about “who was in the room at the time,” and the importance of having the “right people” and “community level” leaders involved in the process.

Shared leadership is also important in collaborations because it broadens the social networks and personal relationships that can be leveraged in the effort. Throughout the interviews, we heard the participants talk about “who was in the room at the time,” and the importance of having the “right people” and “community level” leaders involved in the process. When we asked the original conveners how they were able to bring so many people to the table and create the broad-based group of funders, they explained that “it was just a lot of meetings and talking to people.” Other committee leaders also described how particular phone calls, lunches, and meetings for coffee helped to cultivate and sustain support for the initiative.

The United Agenda for Children also illustrates the important role that consultants and technical-assistance providers can play in leading a collaborative process. While the consulting firm was the initial convener and facilitator of the meetings, an executive director was hired

during Phase II to support the work of the various committees. Later, other consultants were also brought in to provide technical assistance. For example, researchers at a local university worked with the committees to create a logic model and design data-collection strategies for the initiative. A local project management firm and a national consulting firm were brought in to conduct the research about intermediary organizations. Finally, the funders hired a national management-consulting firm to work with the Council for Children’s Rights to develop the structure and vision for The Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures.

Sustained Commitment

The experiences of the United Agenda for Children also illustrate how hard it is for a community to sustain a voluntary collaborative effort over time, even with the support from a collaborative group of funders. For example, some of the people we interviewed said that because there had been so much of an investment in planning for the town hall event, recruiting a diverse group of participants, and “having the day go well,” less attention had been paid to developing a plan for implementing the community priorities. Yet, the initiative lasted for five years, in large part because representatives of the foundations kept supporting the initiative and moving it forward.

The recession, however, was a challenge to sustainability. One third of the people we interviewed described how the initiative began to change in 2007 as local nonprofits, county agencies, and the banks in particular began to feel the effects of the economic downturn. As one foundation leader explained, “cutbacks were happening all over Charlotte,” and according to many it was clear that the county was going to play a much smaller role than originally planned in funding the children’s intermediary organization due to cuts in its budget. In addition, while the original plan was to fund the intermediary for 10 years because the research had shown that it would take this long to begin to see long-term community changes, the funders – especially the foundations associated with the banks – found that raising this kind of support in

a declining economy was going to be a significant challenge. Yet, as another foundation leader noted, even as the initiative progressed and the initial momentum waned, nobody declined the invitation to sit on the committees and funders continued to invest in the initiative. “Basically, we felt like [the United Agenda for Children] is too important to let it die,” one participant noted.

Discussion

While this study is based on information gathered from a small group of residents and key stakeholders (as well as the review of initiative’s detailed documentation), it does provide important insight into how the overall initiative unfolded and how it was perceived by those involved.

The study also illustrates how the role of the foundations evolved over time. In Phase I, the foundations provided the financial support and sponsored the town hall event that helped to give the event legitimacy and raise its visibility. In Phase II, the foundations began to lead the collaborative process by serving on and chairing the steering committee. In Phase III, the foundations served on the design team and helped to shape and fund the children’s intermediary organization.

The study also illustrates exactly how hard it can be for government agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and others to work collaboratively over time. While the town hall meeting was a success in that a broad and diverse group of residents came together to discuss and deliberate about the welfare of the community’s children, the work that was done by volunteer committees in Phase II and Phase III was time consuming and labor intensive. Eventually, the work became too hard to sustain without a permanent structure. While sending out follow up emails and copies of white papers was a necessary first step in maintaining the connection with these volunteers, it was not sufficient. Additional opportunities for public input and volunteer action could have been created. For example, some of the steering committee meetings could have been open to the public. Drafts of the white papers could have

been posted publicly for review and comment. There could have been an opportunity for those who were not at the June 2006 retreat to make suggestions about how to sustain the work. Finally, there could have been a more thoughtful and sustained media campaign.

While the initiative was a broad collaborative effort with a multitude of actors, including nonprofit organizations, government agencies, foundations, private-sector representatives, and others, the United Agenda for Children at times could have fallen victim to a version of each of Salamon’s philanthropic failures.

For example, the risk of philanthropic particularism emerged twice during the United Agenda for Children. In the planning for the town hall meeting, the initial conveners made a deliberate decision to focus broadly on the safety, health, and education of children. While each of these issues could have been explored separately, the decision by the foundations and the consulting firm to focus on all three helped create a common vision that would unite the schools, the early-care and out-of-school-time service providers, the health and mental health service providers, the police, the courts, the juvenile justice system, and the many other organizations dedicated to the welfare of children in Charlotte.

Later, when the design team was trying to find the home for the children’s intermediary, a few of the foundations and other nonprofit service providers were concerned with the decision to house the children’s intermediary within the Council for Children’s Rights. As an advocacy group, CFCR had typically provided services to children who were the most at-risk or disadvantaged. In contrast, the intermediary organization was intended to be one that would work on behalf of all children. During Phase III, the staff and board of the CFCR worked closely with the national management-consulting firm to determine how to accommodate both of these missions, resulting in the creation of the separate center within the CFCR.

With respect to the risk of philanthropic paternalism, there was a perception by some

of the nonprofit service providers that the initiative was foundation-driven, as opposed to being a true collaborative partnership among government agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, the private sector, and citizens. During Phase II, when the senior member from one of the foundations was appointed to chair the steering committee, the intention of the appointment was to bring a high-level of visibility to the initiative. This may have, however, had the unintended consequence of giving the impression that the collaborative “belonged” to the foundations. In addition, because the research was not widely disseminated and the planning for children’s intermediary was done internally within CFCR, in collaboration with the funders, many of the key stakeholders were unaware of the final outcome.

When the senior member from one of the foundations was appointed to chair the steering committee, the intention of the appointment was to bring a high-level of visibility to the initiative. This may have, however, had the unintended consequence of giving the impression that the collaborative “belonged” to the foundations.

In large-scale collaborative work, there is always a risk that those who are no longer connected to or informed about the process will feel excluded or wonder if anything is actually being accomplished. This tendency is exacerbated when resources are at stake. When foundations are perceived as leading a community-based process, there is a risk that those who are not “in the loop” will view this as philanthropic paternalism. At the same time, if this group of community leaders and foundations had not stepped forward

and supported the initiative over the span of more than five years and created the children’s intermediary organization, the community would still lack the capacity to pursue the vision of the United Agenda for Children.

With respect to the risk of philanthropic amateurism, much of the early work of the United Agenda for Children was performed by a collaborative group of volunteers: service providers, concerned citizens, community advocates, and public and private leaders.

And while many of the committees of the United Agenda for Children were comprised of professionals who work in the fields of child health, safety, and education, the work was supplemental to the work that they did with their individual organizations. Even the initial organizers and leaders described how they “didn’t own the initiative,” how they were responsible for the “process and not the content,” and that “everybody had day jobs.”

This reliance on volunteer effort led to a loss of momentum toward the end of Phase II. And, at that point, the United Agenda for Children could have failed as so many previous community initiatives relating to children had before.

But the risk of philanthropic amateurism was avoided when the volunteers decided to create a sustainable structure to house and coordinate the collaborative work of the United Agenda for Children.

With respect to the risk of philanthropic insufficiency, the United Agenda for Children was created because there was a sense that neither the voluntary sector nor the government agencies on their own could adequately meet the health, safety, and educational needs of children. Collaboration was needed, and the outcome was the creation of The Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures, which is now charged with continuing to work with government agencies, schools, and nonprofit service providers to leverage the opportunities to create change.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the limitations of our work. This project was a retrospective, process evaluation of the events

associated with an initiative that lasted longer than five years (some might call this a post-mortem assessment). We relied heavily on self-reported data and the recollections of the people involved in the process. Moreover, the survey and the focus group participants represented just a small group of people who attended the town hall meeting. While we cannot generalize our findings to the larger population of everyone who participated in the project or answer all of the questions that we like to be able to answer, we do believe that the consistency of the commentary and the descriptive feedback we received provides valuable insight into how the overall initiative unfolded and how it was perceived by many of those involved.

Conclusion

In this article, we describe the challenges of sustaining a cross-sector collaborative initiative, and identify four important and valuable lessons for foundations and others who are trying to lead these types of efforts. First, during cross-sector collaborative efforts, it is important to share the agendas and meetings from minutes and create regular opportunities for those who are not at the table to give input and provide feedback in order to build trust and maintain communication. Second, sharing the leadership with providers and other community partners can help minimize the appearance – or reality – that foundations, which have power and the resources that the community needs, are controlling the collaborative process. Third, foundations need to recognize that voluntary collaborative efforts, especially large-scale community efforts, will require administrative and technical support and they should plan on investing in administrative support or using outside consultants. Finally, foundations need to understand the limits to voluntary collaboration. While having a group of committed stakeholders with a common vision to improve the health, safety, and education of children was a necessary first step toward creating community change, Charlotte found that over time this approach was not sustainable. It requires a long-term investment in a community intermediary organization to engage in community planning, community engagement, advocacy, and research and evaluation.

While having a group of committed stakeholders with a common vision to improve the health, safety, and education of children was a necessary first step toward creating community change, Charlotte found that over time this approach was not sustainable. It requires a long-term investment in a community intermediary organization to engage in community planning, community engagement, advocacy, and research and evaluation.

References

- ABELSON, J., PIERRE-GERLIER, F., EYLES, J., SMITH, P., MARTIN, E., & GAUVIN, F. P. (2003). Deliberations about deliberative methods: Issues in the design and evaluation of public participation processes. *Social Science & Medicine*, 57, 239–51.
- AMERICASPEAKS. (2010). *21st Century Town Meeting*. Retrieved February 28, 2011: <http://americaspeaks.org/services/21st-century-townmeeting>
- ANHEIER, H. K. (2005). *Nonprofit organizations: Theory, management, and policy*. New York: Routledge.
- BONDS, M., & FARMER-HINTON, R. L. (2009). Empowering neighborhoods via increased citizen participation or a Trojan horse from city hall: The neighborhood strategic planning (NSP) process in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *Journal of African American Studies*, 13(1), 74–89.
- BROWN, P., & FIESTER, L. (2007). *Hard lessons about philanthropy and community change from the neighborhood improvement initiative*. Retrieved on March 17, 2012: http://hewlett_prod.acesfconsulting.com/uploads/files/HewlettNIIReport.pdf

- BRYSON, J. M., CROSBY, B. C., & STONE, M. M. (2006). The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: Propositions from the literature. *Public Administration Review*, December, Special Issue, 44-55.
- BUTTON, M., & MATTSON, K. (1999). Deliberative democracy in practice: Challenges and prospects for civic deliberation. *Polity*, 31, 4609-637
- CARMAN, J. G. (2001). Community foundations: A growing resource for community development. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 12(1), 7-24.
- CAUDLE, S. (2004). Qualitative data analysis. In J. S. Wholey, H. P. Hatry, & K. E. Newcomer (Eds.), *The handbook of practical program evaluation* (2nd ed.) (pp. 417-438). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS. (2011). *The Larry King Center*. Retrieved April 16, 2012: <http://cf-crights.org/the-larry-king-center/>
- EICHLER, M. (2007). *Consensus organizing: Building communities of mutual self interest*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- EMSHOFF, J. G., DARNELL, A. J., DARNELL, D. A., ERICKSON, S. W., SCHNEIDER, S., & HUDGINS, R. (2007). Systems change as an outcome and a process in the work of community collaborators for health. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 39, 255-267.
- FAIRFIELD, K. D., & WING, K. T. (2008). Collaboration in foundation grantor-grantee relationships. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 19(1), 27-44.
- GAZLEY, B. (2010). Why not partner with local government? Nonprofit managerial perceptions of collaborative disadvantage. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 39(1), 51-76.
- GREEN, G. P., & HAINES, A. (2012). *Asset building and community development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- GROGAN, C. M., & GUSMANO, M. K. (2005). Deliberative democracy in theory and practice: Connecticut's Medicaid Managed Care Council. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 5(2) 126-146.
- HENDRIKS, C. M. (2005). Participatory storylines and their influence on deliberative forums. *Policy Sciences*, 38(1), 1-20
- HSIEH, H. & SHANNON, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- LASKER, R. D., WEISS, E. S., & MILLER, R. (2001). Partnership synergy: A practical framework for studying and strengthening the collaborative advantage. *Milbank Quarterly*, 79(2), 179-205.
- LENKOWSKY, L. (2002). Foundations and corporate philanthropy. In L. Salamon (Ed.), *The state of nonprofit America* (pp. 355-386). Washington: Brookings Institute.
- LUKENSMEYER, C. J., & BRIGHAM, S. (2002). Taking democracy to scale: Creating a town hall meeting for the twenty-first century. *National Civic Review*, 91(4), 351-366.
- NABATCHI, T. (2010). Addressing the citizenship and democratic deficits: The potential of deliberative democracy for public administration. *American Review of Public Administration*, 40(4), 376-399.
- OSTROWER, F. A. (2007). Innovation, accountability, and independence at three private foundations funding higher education civic engagement, 1995 to 2005. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 18(2), 237-253.
- SALAMON, L. M. (1995). *Partners in public service: Government-nonprofit relations in the modern welfare state*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- SKOCPOL, T. (1999). Advocates without members: The recent transformation of American civic life. In T. Skocpol & M. Fiorina (Eds.), *Civic engagement in American democracy* (pp. 461-510). Washington: Brookings Institute.
- WEEKS, E. C. (2000). The practice of deliberative democracy: Results from four large-scale trials. *Public Administration Review*, 60(4), 360-372.
- YANKEY, J. A., & WILLEN, C. K. (2010). Strategic alliances. In D. O. Renz & Associates (Eds.), *The Jossey-Bass handbook of nonprofit leadership and management* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Joanne G. Carman, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political science and public administration at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Her work has appeared in a number of journals, including the *American Journal of Evaluation*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, and *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joanne G. Carman, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of North Carolina - Charlotte, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001 (email: jgcarman@uncc.edu).

Rebecca A. Hefner is a recent graduate of the Master of Public Administration program at the University of North Carolina - Charlotte.

APPENDIX Data Collection Instruments

Data Collection Instruments

Interview Questions for Key Stakeholders

1. How did your organization get involved in the United Agenda for Children?
2. What was your organization's role initially?
 - a. Who participated? What was their role?
3. How did [organization name] role change over time?
 - a. What were some of the important decisions that were made?
 - b. How did they come about?
4. We know The Larry King Center was created out of the United Agenda for Children. Are you aware of how that came into being? If so, tell us about that.
5. What do you think the United Agenda for Children intended to accomplish? Did it?
6. Did your participation in the initiative change who you work with?
7. Were there community partners that you think should have participated, but didn't? Why or why not?
8. What role did the media play?
9. Moving forward to today and the connection between the United Agenda for Children and The Larry King Center:
 - a. Do you think those who participated in the UAC understand the connection?
 - b. Do other nonprofits understand the connection?
 - c. Do local government agencies or funders?
 - d. Does the community at large?
 - e. What role do you think The Larry King Center should play?
10. As we move forward with the evaluation, are there specific events or decisions that were made that you think we should look closely at?
11. Who are the people that you think we need to talk to?

Survey Questions for the United Agenda for Children Participants

1. Do you remember participating in the United Agenda for Children town hall event on December 11, 2004?
2. How did you get involved?
3. What were your expectations for the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
4. How well did the United Agenda for Children town hall event meet your expectations?
5. Following the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you more (or less) engaged with children's issues in our community? If so, please describe.
6. At the United Agenda For Children town hall event, all of the participants were asked to make a personal commitment to improving the lives of children in our community. Do you recall the commitment?
 - No
 - Yes.....If yes, what commitment did you make? Did you keep it?
7. In addition to participating the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you involved in the United Agenda for Children in other ways?
 - No
 - Yes.....If yes, how were you involved?
8. Since participating in the United Agenda for Children Town Hall event, have seen any changes in the community's approach to issues surrounding children?
 - No
 - YesIf yes, please describe these changes.
9. Overall, how would you describe your experience with the United Agenda for Children?
10. Have you heard of The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures?
 - No
 - Yes..... If yes, do you know what they do?
 - No
 - Yes.....If yes, please describe what they do.

Thank you for your responses. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group to tell us more about your experience with the United Agenda for Children? The focus group is scheduled for Wednesday, December 1, from 6:30-7:30 PM at the Children & Family Services Center uptown. Parking is free and refreshments will be provided. If yes, please enter your e-mail address below so that we may contact you with an invitation.

Focus Group Questions for the United Agenda for Children Participants

1. How did you get involved in the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
2. What were your expectations for the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
3. How well did the United Agenda for Children town hall event meet your expectations?
4. Did anyone ever follow up with you or ask you to participate in initiative in any other way?
5. Do you know what happened after the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
6. Did you see any media coverage of the United Agenda for Children before or after the event? What was that like?
7. Since the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you more (or less) engaged with children's issues in our community? If so, please describe.
8. Have you heard of The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures? Do you know what they do?