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Investigating the Roles of Community Foundations in the Establishment and Sustainability of Local College Access Networks in Michigan

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Keywords: Community foundation, college access, education

Community foundations have a rich history providing support for the advancement of education at all levels. In many communities, the foundation manages locally funded college scholarships to support the college aspirations of families in their service regions. A number of foundations have partnered with local education agencies to test innovative school-reform strategies ranging from vouchers and charter schools to whole school reforms within the public system (McDonald, 2011).

Community-based philanthropy has been an important partner in education for many years and its role has evolved and changed. In this article, we examine the role of community foundations in the creation and establishment of one such evolution in school-reform efforts – local college access networks (LCANs) in the state of Michigan. An LCAN is a community-based college-access coordinating body supported by a team of community and education leaders committed to building a college-going culture and increasing local college attendance and completion rates. There are 48 LCANs in Michigan; 40 have a community foundation as the lead organization or a key member in the LCAN partnership.

In this article, we situate LCAN collaborations in the context of a unique set of social and political factors that have informed the direction the state has taken on college access and success and, in the process, we ask two questions: What role have community foundations played in the formation

Key Points

- Community foundations have a long history of supporting college access, particularly through the management of scholarship programs. This article examines the role of community foundations in the creation and establishment of local college access networks (LCAN) across the state of Michigan.
- We use the collective impact model as a framework to examine the roles of community foundations in the creation and development of LCANs.
- Our findings illustrate that community foundations have played a variety of roles, from fundraising to convening to cheerleading.
- The success of the community-foundation approach to LCAN development is evident both in the interviews conducted and the statements of key education partners around the state.
- The primary challenge for most communities is how to develop a plan for sustainability while allowing others to provide leadership for these evolving organizations for social change.

of LCANs? What challenges have community foundations identified in their efforts to develop LCAN strategies? In addition, we also begin to identify the successes community foundations have identified in their work to promote college access and success within their communities.

We utilize the collective impact model as described by Kania and Kramer (2011) to reflect on the roles, successes, and challenges community foundations identify in their work with LCANs. Other models have been employed to consider

elements of the social-change process (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Kremers, 2011; Strickland, 2009; Vandeventer & Mandell, 2007), but we find that collective impact is useful here for two reasons: It has received considerable attention recently following the work of Kania and Kramer and the successes of the STRIVE cradle-to-career education initiative in Cincinnati, and collective impact has been articulated as part of the larger Michigan state strategy to enhance LCAN efforts to increase college access and success. The collective impact model is not intended to isolate the roles of particular partners, but the reports of foundation partners give us some indication of what roles are being played and where more work is necessary. What we report here represents initial findings in a larger formative evaluation of the development and implementation of LCANs in partnership with community foundations. As such, it is important to recognize that community foundations are in the early stages of their work with LCANs and we suspect their roles will evolve over time.

The Michigan Context

Before we consider the role of community foundations in local efforts to promote college access, it is important to consider the state of Michigan's unique social and political context. One of Michigan's critical assets is the network of community foundations throughout the state and the strong, collaborative leadership provided by the Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF). Sixty-five community foundations, with assets ranging from \$1 million to more than \$600 million, operate throughout communities in Michigan. For more than 40 years CMF has served in a coordinating capacity to strengthen, promote, and increase philanthropy in Michigan. Education is a key part of the mission of community foundations and the evolution of college-access strategies represents the most recent iteration of that work for many of those foundations. This robust network of community-based philanthropy is an important catalyst for social innovation and change in their local communities and college access is among the priorities of many of the foundations.

In March 2004, Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm convened a statewide Commission on Higher

Education and Economic Growth, chaired by Lt. Gov. John Cherry. The commission was charged with identifying strategies to double the number of college graduates in the state in the next 10 years and to more closely align the outcomes of postsecondary education with the employment opportunities of the future.

Most recommendations focused on system-level strategies to increase opportunity, but one recommendation called for the creation of community compacts leveraging the assets of local communities to improve educational opportunity. Within six months, the city of Kalamazoo announced its promise to the next generation of public school students. The Kalamazoo Promise included free tuition and fees to any public college or university in the state on condition that the student attend Kalamazoo Public Schools for at least four years (award is scaled to time in district) and maintain good academic standing. The Promise has received a great deal of attention both nationally and within the state and it is not our intention to focus on it here. However, it was an important catalyst for the expansion of place-based strategies for college access and success. The governor and state lawmakers saw the potential of the Promise and crafted legislation to create 10 Promise Zones across the state, mostly in large urban centers. The Promise Zone legislation passed in 2007 and the participating communities were announced in 2008. State leaders had a model around which to catalyze creative energy for P-16 education reform, and these place-based approaches were on the minds of reformers at all levels.

In January 2008, the U.S. Department of Education issued a call to states to apply for the College Access Challenge Grant (CACG), a program initiated as part of the 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The grants were available to each state to create and expand innovative programs designed to help more students attend college and earn postsecondary credentials of value. In exchange, states were required to provide a 50 percent match – meaning for every federal dollar granted, the state would contribute an additional 50 cents. The size of the grant was proportional

to the size of the population of children living below the poverty level the year prior. California received the largest portion of the \$66 million and the smallest states were granted \$330,000. In 2010, the program was reinvigorated as part of the College Access and Completion Innovation Fund and received additional funding per year for an additional five years, meaning that in Michigan the amount of the award nearly doubled from \$2.2 million per year to \$4.2 million per year (Oliver, 2011). The purpose of the grant program expanded to include both access to college and postsecondary success. The CACG opened up a window of opportunity for potential partners from across the state to develop a plan for most effectively targeting those resources for innovative and potentially scalable efforts. The confluence of these factors gave rise to the locally initiated, place-based college-access strategies.

In late 2008, CMF and its member community foundations partnered with the state of Michigan, the National College Access Network, and the Community Research Institute of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership at Grand Valley State University to analyze college-access services in Michigan. As a result of that research and the collective work of the governor's office and agencies and organizations across the state, the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) was officially launched to dramatically increase college participation and completion rates, particularly among Michigan's low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. In July 2009, CMF partnered with the newly formed network to seek funding from the Kresge Foundation for MCAN sub-grants and Community Foundation Challenge Grants.

With an investment of \$500,000 from the Kresge Foundation through the Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA) in early 2010, CMF launched the Community Foundation Challenge Grant initiative to encourage Michigan community foundations to expand, enhance, strengthen, and sustain their local college-access partnerships. The purpose of the initiative was to leverage local private investment to engage and sustain college-

access partnerships, thereby increasing the college-going rate and culture in Michigan. After the initial success of the Community Foundation Challenge Grant, Kresge in 2011 invested an additional \$1.2 million in the work of CMF and community foundations across the state to continue their role with the local college-access networks.

Achieving Social Change With Collective Impact

In the recent social-change literature, a variety of frameworks may be useful to identify the role of philanthropy in community based initiatives. Early literature in this area borrowed from organizational theory and examined the features and functions of coalitions intended to facilitate change, where the emphasis was placed on the role of the lead agency (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993). Community based approaches to health promotion have been used to examine the features of coalitions and the potential roles of private foundations, granting agencies, and local health organizations (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1996). Others have utilized systems theory to develop ecological frameworks for how social change is likely to occur (Tseng et al., 2002). Vanderverter and Mandell (2007) discuss the characteristics of effective networks for finding solutions to complex problems and focus on the conditions under which networks are effective vehicles to address social problems. Their work suggests that the nature of the network depends upon the nature of the problem and the level of risk for partner organizations. Strickland (2009) uses the theory of leverage as part of the more general linear logic model to consider the role of the philanthropic community in development of the Kalamazoo Promise. More recently, layering has been used as a concept to examine the vertical integration of partnerships to effect social change, which places the foundation squarely in the center of the model (Kremers, 2011). Each of these models has strengths and limitations and they require that those initiating change consider three key questions: What is the nature of the problem? At what level do you plan to affect change? Who is responsible for initiating the change?

Kania and Kramer (2011) suggest as part of their

collective impact model that the sorts of problems typically addressed by foundations fall into three broad categories: simple, complicated, or complex. Simple problems are readily understood, are subject to clear and concise interventions, and the outcomes of intervention are consistent. Few problems requiring attention from the philanthropic community are ever so simple, but frequently we attempt to compartmentalize complexity so as to isolate each activity with its corresponding dimension of the problem. According to collective impact, philanthropic partners play critical roles but they may or may not serve in the central coordinating role. Kania and Kramer (2011) note that

... collective impact [unites] a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. (p. 1)

Collective impact leaves the door open for an existing partner to serve in this capacity but, as we discuss, there are trade-offs to assuming that role, which may suggest foundations need to carefully consider the role they wish to play. We discuss this in greater detail in the discussion section below.

The collective impact model suggests that there are five conditions for successful social innovation and change (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012):

- a common agenda,
- shared measurements,
- mutually reinforcing activities,
- continuous communication, and
- a backbone organization.

A common agenda requires that all organizations come together and discuss their understandings and assumptions regarding the nature of a given social problem and the potential remedies to address it. These differences force organizations to challenge assumptions and to think critically about their own strategies in relation to those proposed by others. Kania and Kramer (2011) note the goal is not to develop complete consensus, but rather a shared understanding and a collective vision for the outcomes.

Shared measurements emanate from a common agenda. Even if there is no consensus on the means to affect change, a collective impact process should result in clarity on the ends. The principal advantage of a set of shared measurements is the ability of members of the collective to hold one another accountable for progress on predetermined performance benchmarks. The shared-measurement system also recognizes that the array of strategies employed in a given community do not operate in isolation – any number of providers may be focused on the same problem, while other initiatives target different challenges that may have an indirect influence on other outcomes.

Kania and Kramer (2011) suggest that “the power of collective action comes not from the sheer number of participants or the uniformity of their efforts, but from the coordination of their differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action” (p. 40). Mutually reinforcing activities suggest some degree of coordination as a result of the common agenda, but it allows for partners to maintain discretion over how the goals will be achieved.

The fourth pillar of an effective collective impact initiative is continuous communication to develop trust among the principal leaders and to allow for the expectation of accountability among partners. Implicit in this strategy is that, in order to develop a common agenda, organizations traditionally operating in silos must first establish trust among partners before it is possible to share openly, challenge assumptions, rethink strategies, and develop mutually reinforcing activities. They

also recognize that developing trust takes time and it requires an intentionally structured process of continual engagement for that trust to develop.

Finally, managing a collective impact initiative

... requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails. (p. 40)

Kania and Kramer (2011) argue one of the critical challenges for collective impact strategies is that no single partner institution has sufficient time to manage the development of the shared agenda, facilitate the continuous communication necessary to develop trust, or gather and report data on shared measurements. The identification or creation of a backbone organization is critical to the process and is not without its challenges. On one hand, the organization must be committed solely to the collective impact process and willing to assume responsibility for managing the process and facilitating collaboration. On the other, it must enjoy the trust of partnering organizations and be viewed as a legitimate arbiter of conflicts among partner organizations.

The collective impact model is not without its limitations. Kania and Kramer (2011) note that partners must first set aside their expectations for short-term outcomes in favor of gradual social change that is broader and more complex. Second, it is costly to develop the organizational structure for sustained change and many funders are skeptical of the long-term investment required. Kania and Kramer discuss the importance of funding social change in new ways, but it does not rise to the level of significance assigned to the five conditions indicated above. As we discuss below, sustainability is a critical issue for foundations – as it is with any funder – and collective impact allows another organization to assume responsibility for developing a long-term sustainability plan.

An Exploratory Case Study

This article reports initial findings of a larger investigation of the role community foundations play in the development of place-based college-access strategies. The relationship between the community foundations and the establishment of local college access networks in Michigan is situated in a much larger state and federal sociopolitical context, but for the purposes of this exploratory analysis we focus only on the role of the community foundation in the establishment and development of the local initiatives. Yin (2009) suggests the case-study approach is appropriate when the purpose of the study is to describe the features, context, and process of the phenomenon under investigation. This case study considers the community foundations partnering with LCANs as the unit of analysis. We use data from three separate focus groups conducted over a period of six months. During that time, we spoke with 23 representatives of community foundations across the state, all of which were purposefully selected for their involvement with their respective LCAN. The purpose of those conversations was to better understand the role community foundations currently play in their LCANs; what challenges they face in the development, implementation, and sustainability of their respective LCANs; and what resources and supports could be useful to community foundations engaged in this work. Eventually, we will use these findings to develop and administer a survey to the broader network of community foundations in Michigan – the results of which will inform the development and refinement of our conceptual model linking community based philanthropy with efforts to improve college access and success.

In addition to the interviews, we have collected an array of documents describing the partnerships between community foundations and their LCANs, requests for proposals for the Community Foundation Challenge Grants, and materials created by the Council of Michigan Foundations designed to help community foundations more effectively participate in and provide leadership for their local college access strategies. The next step in the larger two-year investigation is to identify and conduct a series of case studies to explore, in

depth, how community foundations engage in the LCAN development process, how the LCAN defines its work in college access, and what unique assets each community foundation brings to the table as it develops its community-based college access strategies. All of this work is part of a formative evaluation of the development and implementation of community-foundation partnerships with LCANs. Future work will report our findings from the case studies as we consider the feasibility of scaling these partnerships to other states and the intersection of the multiple layers of influence within which this work occurs. The next section uses the social-change framework as a way to understand the roles community foundations play in their respective LCANs and the challenges they face in that work.

community-foundation focus groups, we turn our attention to the challenges they have identified as they engage in the collaborative process of initiating social change within their communities.

Roles of the Foundation

The first and perhaps most obvious role community foundations have been expected to assume is that of principal fund developer, and they talk about this role in a number of ways. One participant said:

We have a capital campaign under way to fund long-term existence of the college access network here at the county and everybody wants to know: “Are you all just about giving away scholarships?” No, we have much more going on here.

Few actually commented on the development of endowments at this stage, even though as part of the Community Foundation Challenge Grants community foundations were required to commit a minimum of 20 percent of funds to an endowment. But as one participant noted, “I’d like it to be a lot more endowment so we do have an exit strategy and that does become our role.”

However, as this comment implies, participants note that more of their energy is spent raising money for current programming or matching requirements of existing grants rather than spending time building the endowment. As another participant observed, “We are the ones writing the grant applications; we are the ones really scrambling trying to do the long-term funding plans.” In another conversation, a participant noted that they are the only members of the LCAN leadership team in their community that is even willing to ask others for money to support the activities of the collaboration. On one hand, community foundation representatives recognized the important capacity they bring to the LCAN in terms of fund development, but they also express concern that other partners are unable or unwilling to participate in this facet of LCAN work.

Kania and Kramer (2011) do not identify fund development as one of the five key factors in successful collective impact models, but they

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Findings From Community Foundation Partners

To understand the potential influence of community foundations on the work of LCANs, we first set out to understand how community foundations identify the various roles they play. Our conversations reveal that community foundations have either assumed or been asked to play a variety of roles within their LCAN initiatives. Because we have spoken only with community-foundation representatives about these questions, we are careful not to overstate their level of responsibility for any of the roles. Rather, we focus on how they talk about their roles, the successes they identify, and whether there are potential challenges or concerns as they balance their responsibilities. After discussing the themes from our

recognize a “funder’s reluctance to pay for infrastructure and preference for short-term solutions” and argue that “collective impact requires instead that funders support a long-term process of social change without identifying any particular solution in advance” (p. 41). The tension between raising money for current initiatives and developing endowments underscores that community foundations recognize the important distinction but are pulled by partners to raise funds for shorter-term solutions.

Many participants in our conversations noted their role as conveners and connectors among community partners. One participant noted:

[A]ddressing the issue collectively, I think that it does have more probability of success when a mutual convener of any sort is the central organizing party. ... Community foundations [are] in a unique position to do that because we are apolitical.

Another participant observed that “our role has evolved into one where we are truly a network of providers; we serve as more of an intermediary role connecting resources – that kind of building relationships [and] providing information – that sort of role.”

Where the first comment suggests a formal convening role serving as organizer and host, the second suggests the key to the convening role is the extensive network they have accrued as longstanding community partners. Often the community foundations are viewed as legitimate, collaborative partners that community members trust:

[W]e have a director of our LCAN but it really takes the community foundation coming back to the table, just like we did at the beginning. ... It doesn’t seem to be enough to have our LCAN representative; it really needs the weight of the community foundation behind it.

The potential concern for community foundations that assume this role has to do with their ability to extricate themselves over the long term and allow others to fill it. Other participants men-

The potential concern for community foundations that assume this role has to do with their ability to extricate themselves over the long term and allow others to fill it. Other participants mentioned their role as facilitators of group process, cheerleaders of the cause, employers (particularly of staff designated to organize the work of the LCAN), fiduciary organizations for the business affairs of many of these young organizations, and incubator of the LCAN.

tioned their role as facilitators of group process, cheerleaders of the cause, employers (particularly of staff designated to organize the work of the LCAN), fiduciary organizations for the business affairs of many of these young organizations, and incubator of the LCAN. Kania and Kramer (2011) warn against having any collective impact partner serve as the backbone organization for the very reasons community foundations express concern. Most key partners do not have the time or the inclination to serve in this very specific capacity, and this is as true for community foundations as it is for other partners. Our early work on the next phase of this study suggests that longer-standing initiatives have begun to delegate the role of the backbone organization to the steering committee for the LCAN.

In addition, two other roles were mentioned frequently by participants: capacity building and coordinating communications. As Kania and Kramer (2011) note, continuous communication

is critical to the success of a collective impact strategy and communication was a particularly common theme in references to both the roles and challenges discussed below. One representative noted that “there is the communication aspect of it which is not only through the school districts but out into the community, too, [and] I think the community foundation is able to play a role because we are a separate organization.”

Capacity building was discussed in a variety of ways – from writing grants and engaging in the fund-development process to targeted training in facilitation and the substance of college access. One participant pointed out the importance of capacity building in their work with the LCAN:

How can we build capacity [among partners] as we go and what might that look like – so the only way I felt that this could be successful is if we continue to have things to build upon but we also built upon layered assets ... the scholarships ... the Promise Zone authority.

Their concern was that in order to build capacity they had to maintain some continuity in programming. Capacity building, as participants describe it, is consistent with the role a backbone organization is likely to play in collective impact initiatives.

Successes Demonstrated Within LCAN Partnerships

LCANs have developed in a variety of different ways throughout Michigan, but the strongest models operate with the community foundation as the lead organization or as one of several prominent coordinating partners. Johnson (2012), in comments to a recent statewide audience of LCAN community foundation partners, acknowledged that the LCANs with the greatest level of demonstrated success have been those with strong community foundation leadership. So while this particular model has been identified internally as an exemplar, part of what makes these partnerships successful is related to the roles community foundation partners have identified. For example, they have been able to raise considerable resources for the planning and

development of their respective LCANs in ways that others have struggled to do. They have also been able to leverage existing partnerships to the benefit of the evolving college-access agenda.

While we did not set out to document successes at this stage of the investigation, we found that several participants illustrated their roles by discussing some of the changes occurring throughout their communities. One of the more persistent themes across the focus groups was that the LCAN expanded community members’ perspectives regarding the role community foundations played in helping students go to college. As one participant summarized,

... the key things for us were, I believe, having a college prep liaison in the school. We have a college resource center now where folks can come In fact, the liaisons send them here, too. And it is getting the message out and convincing people that more assistance is needed beyond just giving them a scholarship.

In this particular community, the foundation is well known among community members for the scholarships it awards, but they now saw that students can benefit from a number of services and the community foundation has a role in providing them. A second theme in terms of successes reflects the level of enthusiasm foundations have been able to generate among community members. As one participant observed,

I feel that there’s been this huge steamroller of expectations from our community that we have been really effective at building up. We are running out as fast as we can and we just can’t keep people in place for five months. ... We need some deliverables right now.

In order to establish support for the LCAN, these representatives were effective in exciting people about the possibilities of the LCAN. Of course, the unintended consequence of this success was that expectations were high for clear and measurable impacts in a relatively short time, something Kania and Kramer warn against.

Finally, a few comments suggest that the college-

access issue and the enthusiasm and resources swirling around it have coalesced the community around a common vision. For example, a focus group participant called college access “a perfect issue for community foundations. ... Donors love it. ... The Chambers of Commerce can get involved. It’s easy to build a collective impact table.” The LCAN opportunity gave this particular community the opportunity to bring a broader coalition of partners together, which has a cumulative effect of strengthening these partnerships for future initiatives as well.

Challenges to LCAN Collaboration

Collaboration takes a good deal of time, energy, and resources to be effective, and for the most part the LCAN strategy is relatively new to most of these communities. Only a few communities were engaged in agenda setting around college access prior to 2010 and that is a relatively short time to develop a common agenda. In addition to the early successes reported by the community foundations, they noted several challenges. A few of the communities represented in our focus groups had begun college access strategies prior to the establishment of the Michigan College Access Network and its regranting initiatives beginning in 2010, but most were in relatively early stages of LCAN formation. At the same time, prior to 2011 MCAN did not offer the collective impact grant program; so even if participants were familiar with or engaged in a collective impact process, it is unlikely they have moved very far along. With that in mind, we report the common themes across the focus groups discussing the challenges community foundations face as they develop their LCANs.

The common agenda is one of the critical distinguishing factors of the collective impact model and while some have embraced collective impact language, others express the challenge of working with their partners. One community-foundation representative noted that, “the bigger, broader vision of our local college-access network is still going through some challenges and growing pains and is getting everyone on the same page to see the broader vision.” A critical challenge cited by participants was bringing some of the key

partners to the table. One participant noted the particular challenge with a school district:

[F]rom a local perspective, inviting the school districts to come to the table and having one school district that just absolutely does not want to play ... but it’s the largest school district in our community. ... That has been our biggest challenge, getting this school district to really play in the sandbox with others.

The LCAN opportunity gave this particular community the opportunity to bring a broader coalition of partners together, which has a cumulative effect of strengthening these partnerships for future initiatives as well.

Most focus group participants agreed developing appropriate partnerships was challenging, and for each community the challenge was different. For the participant above, the support of the high school was a challenge. A follow-up comment from the same individual may indicate part of the problem: “Here we are bringing them this great thing and we’re going to do great works, and why wouldn’t they be excited?” However, in other cases, the education leaders may be the strongest partners in the LCAN, proving that each community will have varying levels of success gaining support from all the necessary partners due to the relationships and personalities that exist in the community.

Perhaps the most consistent challenge identified across the groups was that of sustainability. All of the participants mentioned or agreed in one way or another that they were concerned about sustainability and, in particular, their role in sustaining the LCAN. One participant summarized that

[I am looking at] where can we get the money for more dollars to do this and sort of as advisor to the executive committee ... to keep beating the drum that we need to develop other streams of funding for our LCAN, because the philanthropy sectors are not going to continue to fund forever.

While most foundation representatives recognized the important role of money in the sustainability of the LCANs, it was only one of several themes that emerged on the issue. One participant noted the challenge of maintaining a consistent leadership team relative to the sustainability of the LCAN: “We’ve had a lot of transition with superintendents and principals at our high schools and it’s frustrating, because you lay all this groundwork and establish good will ... and then you are starting over.”

Another participant noted, “I feel like there is pressure to get some immediate things. Even though the things that may make the most significant difference are long-term things, you got to be doing both at the same time.” Part of managing expectations is to demonstrate regularly that the foundation has moved the needle on college access, and to this point standard metrics have been elusive. Another representative noted that

the research piece, the data piece, is huge. We keep getting the message to collect data. If you want to see the air just sucked out of the room, you want to start talking about how we are going to measure this was successful or not with a group of school people who are really leery of measuring things.

Participants reported being generally aware of what data may be available but unaware of how helpful these tools might be to the work they do at the LCAN. This set of challenges may relate to identifying appropriate external partners with the capacity to develop and expand their data collection and evaluation capacity. It might also suggest the importance of enlisting school and district leadership to make data more readily available on the front end and colleges and universities on the back end. Collection of data is only part of the problem. While focus group participants understood generally that successful efforts to

improve college access would result in a greater proportion of high school graduates going to college, demonstrating success while in college, and earning degrees, they are unaware of how best to measure these long-term outcomes. Equally, few mentioned intermediate outcomes that create the conditions for long-term success like the development of career plans, knowledge of the college-going process, academic success in school, and ability to pay for college. Continuous communication came up in other ways as well. For example, one representative indicated that communication “might be the gap in everybody’s strategy, but I think it’s a condition that we need to be paying attention to: ... that constant communication and realistic expectations.” Our recent work examining specific cases suggests that consistent communication may be a critical precursor to setting the common agenda because it is through this process that partners develop trust.

Conclusion

It may be an understatement to surmise that community foundations have played a critically important role in the evolution of their respective LCAN strategies. Community foundation partners report providing leadership primarily in relation to their work serving as the backbone organization of the initiative, facilitating continuous communication, and setting the table for the creation of a common agenda. Of these, their role as a backbone organization was most prevalent and described in a variety of ways. Most participants either expressed or agreed with comments suggesting they were primarily responsible for identifying and convening partners, raising funds for the programmatic features of the LCAN work, and building capacity among partner organizations to share the responsibility.

Our conclusion on this point is that most communities deviate from the collective impact model – none of the foundation representatives in our study indicated that a separate organization was formed to serve as the backbone organization. What we have found, however, particularly in communities that have been engaged in the process for some time, is that there has been a shift to a shared model of coordination where

the steering committee for the LCAN assumes responsibilities typically attributed to the backbone organization. This is one of the critical questions we continue to explore in the context of this study – to what extent the community foundation should serve as the backbone organization for social-change initiatives.

The collective impact model may be the appropriate strategy to effect complex social change, but in the context of locally initiated college-access work it will require rethinking the local-level process, the interchange with other levels, and the roles community foundations choose to play as communities develop their college-access agendas. We suggest that it may also be necessary to recognize the limitations of the collective impact model.

Kania and Kramer (2011) employ a retrospective analysis to identify characteristics of successful comprehensive, community based social-change initiatives. As such, they describe those efforts at a moment in time, which provides no information about how these initiatives evolved or changed.

While we have not yet examined the question, it is possible that the process of moving social-change initiatives changes over time, and strategies necessary to begin the process may differ from those necessary to sustain it. It is also likely that, from a process perspective, collective impact implies a sequence of activities that may begin with continuous communication and the negotiation of a common agenda among key partners that evolves over time to develop a system of shared measurements and identification of mutually reinforcing activities. We argue that the backbone organization may evolve over time and be necessary only once the initiative is firmly established and partners have agreed on the agenda and committed their respective organizations to achieving the agenda.

In this study, we focused our attention on understanding the roles, successes, and challenges reported by community foundations partnered in the formation of LCANs. In the next phase of this work, we will focus greater attention on understanding the mechanisms by which community foundations influence and inform the

Community-foundation partners report providing leadership primarily in relation to their work serving as the backbone organization of the initiative, facilitating continuous communication, and setting the table for the creation of a common agenda. Of these, their role as a backbone organization was most prevalent and described in a variety of ways.

work of LCANs and the degree to which various approaches to collaboration contribute to the relative success of each local-level collaboration. Future analyses will examine the intersection of different layers of influence: local, state, and federal. Agendas operate at each level and, at times, they are extremely well aligned; occasionally, however, those agendas conflict in ways that complicate how local college-access work is accomplished. Equally, future studies should consider in greater depth how communities engage in their work around college access, whether those strategies can be meaningfully employed in other places, and the extent to which a collaborative local college access model, led by the community foundation, is replicable in other state contexts.

Finally, and perhaps most critical from the perspective of community foundation participants, future work must consider sustainability. What role can community foundations play to build sustainable collaborations that are not completely dependent on the leadership they provide? We conclude that community foundations are moving the needle developing community-based strate-

gies to improve college access and success, and that process may be moving more slowly than some hope or expect. The primary concern for foundation partners is whether the work is sustainable as their level of leadership and support changes. Long-term success of these initiatives will be judged by the degree to which more students are able to attend college and earn their degrees, but LCANs can only hope to influence those outcomes if they are successful in developing a common agenda and can move their partners collectively to achieve the goals outlined as part of that agenda. Most are in the early stages of this process, but we are optimistic about the progress they are making based upon the initial reports of community-foundation partners.

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