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

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Models of Social Change: Community Foundations and Agenda Setting

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DEAR READERS,

The Kresge Foundation is committed to increasing postsecondary access and success for low-income and under-represented students across the nation and especially here in our home state of Michigan. We want to recognize the many community foundations that are working with the statewide Michigan College Access Network and more than 40 Local College Access Networks to increase opportunities for students to enter college and earn certificates and degrees. These partnerships exemplify the types of multi-stakeholder collaborations among business, government, and nonprofit organizations that are required when working to address tough social problems.

We would also like to recognize the Council of Michigan Foundations for envisioning and managing the Kresge-funded Community Foundation Challenge Grant Initiative. This initiative has sparked many productive cross-sector conversations that have helped galvanize college access and success efforts in communities across the state. Significantly increasing the education level of our citizenry will be critical to Michigan’s ability to be economically competitive in the 21st century, and we’re delighted that so many community foundations are playing a leadership role in this regard.

This is a reprint of two articles: “Investigating the Roles of Community Foundations in the Establishment and Sustainability of Local College Access Networks in Michigan” by Nathan Daun Barnett and Haley Lamm, and “Models of Social Change: Community Foundations and Agenda Setting” by Nathan Daun Barnett, Jessica Wangeling and Haley Lamm. The articles discuss the initiative in more detail and outline the phases of a formative evaluation. We hope they inform you of the exciting work taking place statewide, and inspire you to join the conversation about how we can help all Michigan students pursue education beyond high school and achieve their dreams.

Sincerely,
Caroline Altman Smith
Senior Program Officer
The Kresge Foundation
Investigating the Roles of Community Foundations in the Establishment and Sustainability of Local College Access Networks in Michigan

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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 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). Vanderventer 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 LCAN; 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.

**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.

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

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 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.

References


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Key Points

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

Models of Social Change: Community Foundations and Agenda Setting

In the spring of 2005, Janice Brown, former superintendent of public schools in Kalamazoo, announced a simple promise to the students and parents of her district: If you attend Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) and earn your high school diploma, the community will pay for your tuition and fees to attend any public two- or four-year institution in the state.

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

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

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

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

It is also important to recognize that there is no one, unitary agenda. At some level, every individual and every organization has an agenda or a set of priorities or programmatic preferences. Each of these agendas is defined around a particular understanding of the problems their respective communities face and the potential solutions they bring to bear on the problem. Any social-change initiative must reconcile the challenge of assembling multiple, overlapping, and, at times, conflicting agendas to develop a shared understanding of both the problem and its possible solutions.

The collective or shared agenda within a community may also be much larger than others observe at a distance. What educators from around the country see in Kalamazoo is an agenda to improve educational opportunity in an impoverished community. A number of those observers understand that it was designed as an economic development strategy to invest in the human-capital potential of the place and the appeal of the
city to prospective employers. What few people recognize outside of Michigan is that the Promise was only one of five pieces of a larger economic development strategy and that all of those pieces were critical both to the buy-in of partners and the outcomes ultimately achieved (Kitchens, Gross, & Smith, 2008).

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

### Models of Social Innovation and Change

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

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The linear transformation model (LTM) attempts to break complex problems down into their component parts by identifying how the designed intervention is likely to affect the near-term outputs and the longer-term outcomes and impacts, making problems simple. The LTM agenda-setting process focuses more narrowly on the linkage of resources to activities and activities to outputs and outcomes (Strickland, 2009), which may be more appropriate for simple or even complicated problems with a specific focus and clearly identifiable linkages between the activities and the expected outcomes. Linear models also describe the temporal dimension of change, recognizing that strategies evolve over time, as do
the structures to support change. The agenda for social change initiated as part of the LTM framework is set in collaboration among a small set of partners that frequently includes community foundations or private philanthropy. The agenda is typically managed by the organization promoting the change strategy and results are reported to funding partners or other sponsoring partners. In our estimation, the LTM is insufficient to address complex, multifaceted social issues. Neither the layering approach nor the collective-impact approach assumes that problems are so simple or that solutions are so tightly connected to intended outcomes. We recognize social problems are, by their very nature, complex and require more nuanced and comprehensive solutions. Both the layering and collective-impact models place agenda setting at the center, but they make different claims about how and by whom it is managed and sustained.

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

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

Perhaps the greatest difference across the approaches is who assumes responsibility for establishing the change agenda and coordinating its activities. The LTM positions the activities at the center of the model, which are typically initiated by a community partner with some knowledge and expertise in a given area. Frumkin’s (2006) Theory of Leverage places greater emphasis on the linkage between resources and activities, but...
activities remain central. The philanthropic organization may be a partner in the early conversations and may shape the direction of whatever strategy is chosen, but it is typically not at the center – the partnering agency assumes that role. In some cases, the community foundation will assume the coordination of these social-change initiatives, but the goal is frequently to move an initiative to self-sufficiency. The layering model assumes just the opposite in terms of who provides coordination. The foundation, by virtue of how it is positioned within the community and among a network of statewide partners, is frequently at the center of the social-change agenda and it seeks out partnerships to “layer” agendas and resources to maximize the potential impact of its collective strategies. Because the foundation has access to resources, it is in a position to leverage its grant dollars to bring in additional revenues from states, other foundations, or the federal government depending on the degree of overlap. This approach provides more flexibility for the foundation to identify partnerships and leverage resources because it is not predicated on establishing a common agenda, but rather on identifying the overlapping interests across separate agendas.

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

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

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

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

The work of collective impact operates primarily within the middle three levels, where the principal leadership (CEO, superintendent, executive directors) commits to the work articulated as part of the common agenda and delegates or empowers mid-level staff (directors, assistant directors, program officers) to coordinate activities promoting change within the community. In smaller communities, mid-level staff may also operate as direct-service providers, but under other circumstances, program coordinators and those engaged in direct service operate at a level separate from the role of the mid-level coordinators. Figure 1 provides a framework for describing the multi-level nature of the collective-impact process. The figure suggests that the framing of a common agenda typically occurs at level four (top level leadership) and the work occurs at levels two or three (mid-level coordination and ground-level work) depending upon the breadth and complexity of the change initiative. The model also recognizes that there are factors external to the collective-impact process that inform or constrain the establishment of the common agenda. For example, there are pressures from the state level (and arguably the federal level, though not pictured here) to focus on a set of common practices and metrics. State-level actors might include government agencies, state interest groups, or coordinating bodies. At the same time, students and parents and many local-level partners are encouraged to set the agenda to address the unique challenges and circumstances of their communities. At times, these agendas do not align well and those coordinating the social-change process assume the responsibility for aligning conflicting priorities to establish the shared agenda.

Figure 1 illustrates the unique position community foundations occupy as they support and influence the college-access agenda or attempt to
coordinate a social-change agenda more broadly. Consistent with the collective-impact model, community foundations play a critical role in assembling key community leaders around a shared agenda. They serve as conveners within their local communities and they help to build capacity among partners to do the collective work. At the same time, community foundations work vertically to align the shared agenda of the community with state-level partners and resources at one end of the vertical spectrum with students, parents, and schools at the other end. It is through both horizontal and vertical alignment that community foundations create a shared agenda with their local partners while balancing the unique agendas from the community and the constrained agendas from statewide actors. As such, the primary challenge is to embrace the unique agenda emerging from community priorities and adapt to the opportunities and constraints introduced among local leaders and state priorities and initiatives.

These competing pressures complicate the process of establishing a common agenda. On the one hand, leadership at all levels recognizes that each community faces a unique set of challenges and can bring different assets and solutions to the table. On the other hand, state or even national initiatives may call for greater standardization of both the process and the solutions brought to bear on the problems, relying upon tested strategies they believe could be brought to scale, even as the local contexts for the solution differ. As such, the agenda-setting process must be understood as the intersection of a robust and sustained process to align community partners horizontally and the vertical alignment of complementary agendas of local initiatives situated in a more complex system of priorities and initiatives at a variety of levels.

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

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

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

Results
One of the realities for any large-scale social-change initiative is that the agenda is never set in isolation. The problems tend to be complex and an array of partners is already likely to be engaged in work related to or specifically addressing the issues under examination.

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

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

With some exceptions, community foundations reported that they included college access as part of their education agenda because their environmental scans and asset-mapping processes led them to conclude that it was an issue of tremendous importance; they were in a position to align existing work to build a collective strategy. Two
additional themes were identified by community foundations. First, as one rural community noted, less formal networking conversations with key civic leaders across their service region about key issues were critical to developing consensus around college access.

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

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

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

The commonality across these experiences is that every participating community foundation was able to link the emerging college-access agenda with either existing or evolving local priorities. Of course, we had only spoken to communities who chose to establish LCANs, so it is plausible that communities that choose not to launch LCANs were not able to establish the same clear linkages to existing local conditions.

**Statewide Influences on the Agenda**

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

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

In all three communities that began setting a college-access agenda prior to the establishment of Michigan College Access Network (MCAN), the statewide college-access network, the initial response was to create a Promise-type program, which was quickly followed by the realization that the community could not afford anything similar to what Kalamazoo had launched. In every case, organizers expressed the importance of that event as a way to catalyze local interest in education and more specifically the transition from high school to college. The second influence of Kalamazoo was less direct. Within three years of Kalamazoo’s launch of the Promise program, MCAN was formed and Michigan passed legislation to create 10 promise zones across the state. Both initiatives were informed by the success of the place-based strategy in Kalamazoo and they created economic incentives for communities to participate in college-access work. MCAN launched several grant initiatives, first with money from the federal College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) and
Money is a powerful motivator and communities have responded. In four of five cases, the opportunity to apply for external funds was a powerful motivating factor, but was always cited as secondary to the local factors discussed above. No one suggested that the availability of grant funding was the motivation for pursuing a college-access agenda, but they were clear that it provided an incentive. As one board member noted:

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

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

Monetary incentives have been identified as effective motivators at different points along the agenda-setting process. MCAN has three separate grant competitions – planning, startup, and collective impact – and with the exception of the latter, they have been cited as effective tools for building the capacity to pursue college access within local communities. The one influence we expected to find but that never emerged was the influence of the statewide commission on higher education and economic growth (Lt. Governor’s Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, 2004). One of the key recommendations in the report called for the creation of local compacts to identify local solutions and leverage local assets to double the number of college graduates in the state. MCAN was directly influenced by this recommendation, but none of the communities mentioned it.

Community Foundation’s Roles Setting the Agenda

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

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

**The Coordinating Function**

The collective-impact model suggests that effective collaboration begins with active engagement among the top leadership across key partner organizations. Participants in this investigation recognize the value of top-level support, but they argue that it may not even be the most important part of the collaborative framework. One foundation participant summarized, I recognize the fact that the best practice would tell us, we should have the CEO and the president of all the organizations involved on a board. Then we should have second … the people who do the work on a second level. That has not quite been the way that we have worked. Like [our CEO], I would not expect him to come to [a steering committee] meeting because he has got other stuff to do. So it has been like [we] spend more with the second-level people that have been in leadership.

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

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

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

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

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

The Kresge challenge grants are designed to create an incentive for community foundations to engage in their LCANs and the tradeoff is similar to those tied to the MCAN grants. On one hand,
The consequence is that state-level priorities impose constraints on the local agenda that make it difficult to respond solely to the unique circumstances facing each community.

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

In this article we make two important contributions to our understanding of how social-change agendas are formed and managed. First, we illustrate the importance of both horizontal and vertical alignment to the success of any initiative as broad and complex as college access. Second, we show how complex the agenda-setting process can be, even when focusing on social change in local communities. Perhaps most important, the juxtaposition of collective impact (horizontal alignment) with layering (vertical alignment) provide an opportunity to think differently about how to formalize the organizing structure to manage social change in communities. Collective impact suggests that a separate backbone
organization is necessary, but our analysis suggests that by activating involvement at multiple levels within a community, principal leadership can empower others within their organizations to provide the structure and support the social-change process requires. Future studies should focus greater attention on how communities differ in how they develop their unique strategies, how community foundations have successfully influenced the establishment and development of their LCANs and the college-access agenda in the state of Michigan, and what lessons can be more broadly applied to other community and state contexts.

References


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