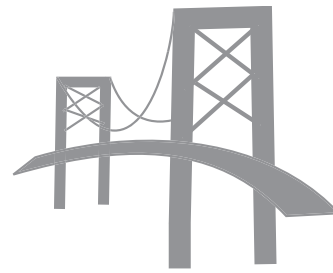# Nonprofit Research Abridged

Connecting nonprofit sector research and leadership

Collaborations and Coalitions for Youth and Community Development

Collaboration has emerged as a strategy of choice for those leading youth and community development initiatives. As communities grapple with enormous problems such as poverty, crime, jobs, education, child care and housing, it is clear that through collaboration, organizations significantly increase community capacity to address such challenges.

Leaders from all sectors realize that no single organization or industry can achieve its full potential without joining forces with others. As Frances Hesselbein, Chairman of the Board of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, noted: "Alone, no one sector — government, business, or social — can meet the needs of family, children, and community. But together, in new kinds of equal partnerships, each addressing a specific need, we can begin to rebuild cohesive communities."

The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, which advocates for a youth development approach that involves young people as active and valued contributors, notes that the process of community youth development requires collaboration.

Collaborations and Coalitions for Youth and Community Development is a summary of Chapter 3 from *Promoting Positive Child, Adolescent, and Family Development: A Handbook of Program and Policy Innovation* (Sage Publications, 2002). The chapter, authored by Robert Ashcraft, Ph.D., presents a synthesis of existing theories and frameworks on collaboration. Please visit our website at www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit for community collaboration examples, the full chapter, and a list of resources and readings.

"No single community organization can provide the range of developmental, preventive, and intervention programs and services required to give young people the experiences they need to mature into successful adults. Rather, creation of such programs requires collaborative planning by a community's youth-serving agencies, other social services and educational institutions, policymakers, community leaders, and young people."

A variety of terms are used interchangeably to describe organizations working together toward mutually beneficial goals. Collaboration, coalitions, alliances, cooperatives, partnerships, networks and similar terms are frequently cited. Despite which name is used, the promise of collaboration is increased community capacity and a greater ability to achieve social goals.

COLLABORATION DEFINED

The following description is the generally accepted definition of collaboration used by youth and human service professionals:

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve results they are more likely to achieve together than alone (Winer and Ray, 1994).

Collaboration includes a fundamental commitment to both relationships and goals, and involves:

- a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility
- mutual authority and accountability for success
- sharing of resources and rewards (Mattessich, et al, 2001).

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Collaboration is not always appropriate, practical, or effective. At times, collaborative initiatives are established only because funding sources mandate them. Additionally, positive outcomes can be difficult to achieve because they depend on recognizing and reconciling issues of trust, power, shared vision, and communication. However, organizations who engage in collaboration often find that in addition to the accomplishment of stated goals, the process itself often contributes to community building.

COLLABORATION FRAMEWORK

The National Network for Collaboration (NNC), researches and publishes materials designed to foster collaboration. The NNC offers resources such as a collaboration guidebook to help leaders organize community resources, define outcomes, and determine action steps – all with a goal of strengthening families.

The NNC offers a four-part framework (illustrated below) that addresses common elements of collaboration.

The overall *collaboration framework* is grounded in diversity—a diversity that respects differences of individual perspectives and talents as well as organizational differences such as traditions and mission. A shared vision emerges when a diversity of opinion, approaches and viewpoints are shaped into a course of action.

The *core foundation* of the framework represents a common understanding that emerges when the intensity of time and effort intersects with a shared vision that flows from the interactions. The vision of the collaboration is an image of a desired future, the mission expresses the purpose of the collaboration (the fundamental reason for existence – who benefits and how), and the values and principles are the beliefs held by individual members that serve as a guide for decision-making. The core foundation of the collaboration evolves continuously because the vision, mission, values and principles held by individuals and organizations of the collaboration are tested continuously throughout the process.

The process of collaboration includes *contextual factors* that contribute to the attainment of desired outcomes or, conversely, that limit the potential for joint efforts to succeed. Individuals who adroitly guide successful collaborations exhibit strong leadership and
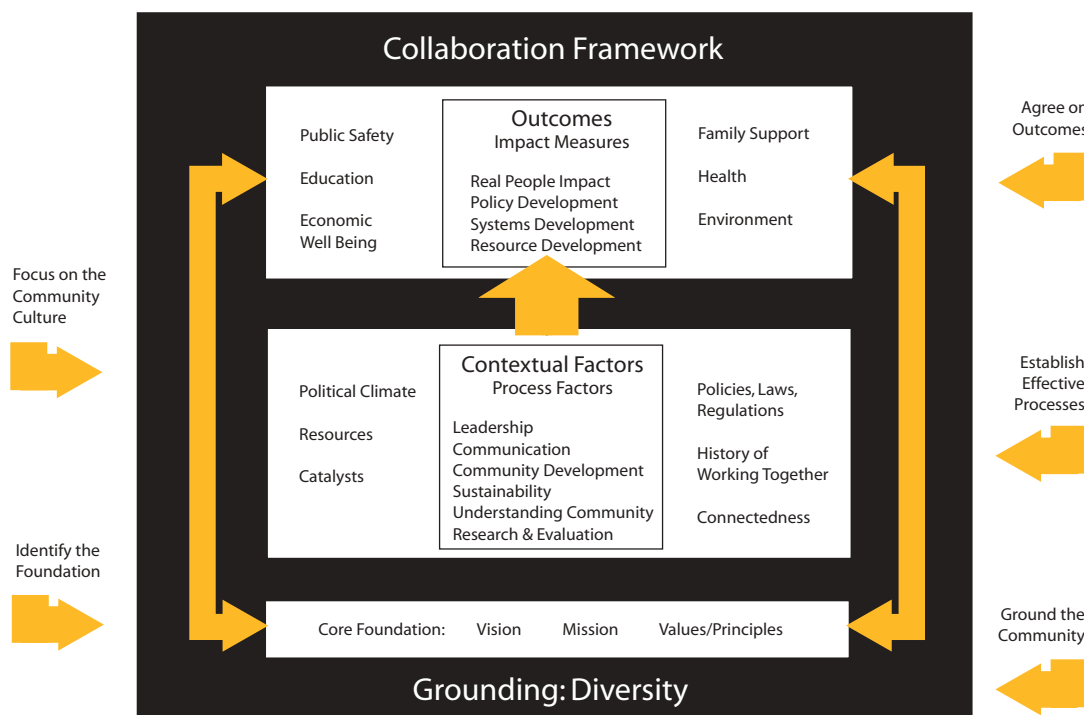
Diagram used with permission of the National Network for Collaboration.

communication skills. These individuals are able to understand and articulate community values. They seek information through research and evaluation methods that support decision-making by collaboration members. Short-term and long-term answers for the development of resources to achieve sustainability are always considered.

Collaborative efforts are undertaken to achieve positive **outcomes**. Outcomes are desired changes that occur as a result of joint efforts focused on specific community issues. The NCC model suggests the six most common outcomes that concern today's communities are: public safety, education, economic well-being, family support, health and the environment.

Successful collaboration leaders

have strong interpersonal skills, a keen sense of purpose, and an ability to clearly articulate the vision.

3. The **process and structure** category refers to the feeling of ownership that collaboration members feel about the work. Successful collaborations adapt process and structure to accommodate new opportunities and changing conditions; but the roles, rights and responsibilities of all members are clearly articulated and understood.

4. **Communication** refers to the openness and frequency of interaction between group members. In successful collaborations, lines of communication are fully developed and utilized. Informal communication links are also encouraged because cohesive groups are developed from high interaction between individuals.

5. The clarity of goals and the extent to which they are attainable defines the **purpose** category. A collaboration has purpose when a shared vision, with clearly articulated goals and strategies, is affirmed by each member. The mission, purpose and delivery system of the collaborative is distinctive from those of participating organizations.

6. **Resources** considers the extent to which the collaboration has sufficient financial, human and in-kind resources to achieve its goals. Implicit to this category is the need for skilled leadership to guide the collaborative. Successful collaboration leaders have strong interpersonal skills, a keen sense of purpose, and an ability to clearly articulate the vision.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Research studies have identified six broad categories of influence on the success of collaborations (Mattessich, et al, 2001). They are:

1. The **environment** refers to the extent there is a history of collaboration in the community and whether the community views the collaborative effort as legitimate. A supportive political and social climate must exist for the collaboration to receive attention from opinion shapers and funders.

2. **Membership characteristics** refer to the mutual respect and trust demonstrated by members of the collaborative. Members should value their individual roles, feel they are distinctive, and believe their work furthers personal goals; while at the same time adhering to the values of the collaboration. Group decisions at the collaboration level may require individual members to negotiate and compromise in order to reach consensus.

About the Researcher

Robert F. Ashcraft, Ph.D., is Director and Associate Professor of ASU's Center for Nonprofit Leadership & Management. In that role he serves as executive director of ASU's American Humanics program. He teaches courses in youth development, fundraising and nonprofit management. His research interests include understanding models of nonprofit leadership and he has written extensively about the links between academic preparation and successful nonprofit careers.

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