



Collective Impact Evaluation 2012-14

Executive Summary

In 2011, GCF's Governing Board approved a five-year initiative to test the principles of **Collective Impact** in achieving large-scale community change. Funding was approved to provide core operating support to six "backbone" organizations serving as lead catalysts for change, conduct an evaluation, and provide technical assistance to the participants using a Community of Practice approach. A seventh backbone organization was added in 2014.

Baseline data were collected in 2012. During that year, much was learned about the roles and functions of a backbone organization, leading to a joint publication with FSG Social Impact Consultants in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR)*. In 2013, FSG worked with GCF and the backbone organization leaders to better understand how to measure change when the work is not direct service provision. Through that analysis, we identified influence and leverage as the leading indicators of backbone success, and once again jointly published a piece in the SSIR.

Although we had fully intended to commission a mid-term external evaluation, we realized early in 2014 that the return on further investment of time and money in an evaluation would likely be marginal. An in-depth review of the mountains of material we had already commissioned and collected provided the information we would need to tell this story ourselves to our Governing Board and community.

After three years of supporting backbone organizations and Collective Impact, our conclusions are:

- Influence is strong and attributable to the backbones who are perceived by stakeholders as adding value to the community change process.
- Leverage is strong, both by focusing our local resources as well as attracting significant outside resources – over \$250,000,000!
- In cases where backbone organizations are leading specific community change initiatives, they are generating positive measurable results. In some cases, they are even collaborating to "power up" the work even more.
- Although it takes a long time to "move the needle" on community-level outcomes, we are starting to see results show up in the data.

The bottom line is that Collective Impact has been a strong investment for GCF. We recommend continuing our current level of financial and staff support at least through the balance of the original plan (2016). Our support is important and unique, not just in Cincinnati, but in the nation.

Part I: Background

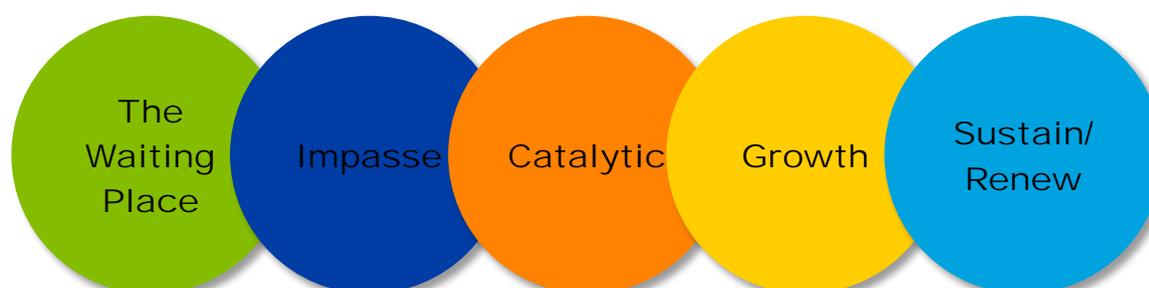
Setting the stage:

What GCF hoped to accomplish by providing core support to backbone organizations for five years (2012-16)

In 2012, we embarked on a five-year initiative to test whether or not sustained and reliable support from GCF (flexible “change capital”) would enable our region’s key catalysts for change (“backbone organizations”) to scale up and increase the pace of their efforts to an even greater degree.

When GCF launched the Collective Impact initiative, we already had six¹ backbone organizations in our region (with other possibilities in the wings), all of which GCF had helped to launch and fund over a period of more than a decade. Cincinnati had already gained national prominence for its work with The StrivePartnership, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, and others. **Appendix 1** summarizes the structures of the six original backbone organizations and a seventh one added in 2014.

The Harwood Institute, a global think tank for community and civic engagement, recently created an index of the five stages of community life. A graphic of the phases is presented below; see **Appendix 2** for additional detail. The Harwood Group posits that communities evolve in these stages. The development and evolution of a collaborative civic culture enables a community to move from phase to phase. In many ways, GCF’s investment was intended to accelerate our community’s evolution across these phases by funding catalysts for change.



Evaluation Questions

1. How are backbone organizations’ success best measured as catalysts for change?
2. What is the change we collectively hope to achieve if we are successful: for individual organization partners, at the initiative (backbone) level, and at the community level?
3. Does sustained and reliable support help backbone organizations scale up and increase the pace of their efforts?
4. Is there any value added to the direction and pace of the change process by funding and assisting multiple backbone organizations as a “cohort”?

¹ Agenda 360, LISC/Place Matters, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, The StrivePartnership, Success by Six and Vision 2015.

Defining Measures of Success

For the first two years of the initiative (2012-13), GCF contracted with FSG Social Impact Consultants as our evaluator. GCF also developed a “Community of Practice” for peer learning. Topics were informed by insights gleaned from an initial baseline evaluation in 2012. **Appendix 3** summarizes the complete timeline of the initiative’s design, implementation and evaluation.

2012: developed a shared theory of change among backbone organizations, identified six key activities of a backbone organization, and developed 27 corresponding indicators of effectiveness organized around 16 key activities. Stakeholder surveys and interviews were conducted for each backbone organization to assess their effectiveness in each core activity area, and to identify needs for continuous improvement.

What we learned about backbone organizations during the first year of the initiative:

- Determining progress and positive momentum is possible by assessing how well backbone organizations perform at various intervals against the six roles determined by FSG to define the distinctive character of a backbone organization:
 1. ***Guide vision and strategy:*** is there a shared understanding of the problem to be solved and a common agenda?
 2. ***Support aligned activities:*** are partners’ actions aligned to goals? Are organizations working together instead of in isolation?
 3. ***Establish shared measurement practices:*** is data shared and used for continuous improvement?
 4. ***Build public will:*** is the community informed and engaged at all levels?
 5. ***Advance policy:*** does public policy support goals? Are systems less fragmented?
 6. ***Mobilize funding:*** is money better aligned and leveraged?
- At the initiative level, it is possible to assess the somewhat intangible outcomes requiring the backbone organization to use intentional influence to change behavior and culture: more effective service providers, more sustainable partner organizations, evidence of increased collaboration, improved systems of service and development, and more direct benefits to the people and/or communities who are most affected by the solution(s).

2013: explored leverage and influence as key components to evaluate and communicate collective impact initiatives.

2014: conducted an internal review of all FSG documents and reports (dashboards, progress) prepared by seven² backbone organizations to examine the effectiveness of a catalyst for change along four dimensions: leverage, initiative success, systems change, and community level impact.

² Green Umbrella participated in the Community of Practice in 2013, and began to receive multi-year funding in 2014.

Part II: Results

What we learned from the baseline analysis:

127 stakeholders offered perceptions about the backbone organizations and GCF's role.

One of five conditions for success when using a collective impact approach is to designate a “backbone” organization. The necessity of a backbone was learned while assessing the various roles needed in order to be a catalyst for change-- activities of which are distinct from direct service providers and other types of organizations:

Backbones

- Because the backbones all existed prior to the launch of GCF's five-year initiative, they all had strengths to build upon to varying degrees, including some funding from outside the region, but particularly in the areas of guiding vision and strategy, sharing data and supporting alignment. They also had areas for improvement, primarily in external communications, building public will, and advancing policy. Technical assistance was organized around communications in 2013 and building community will in 2014.
- Backbones add value as catalysts for change in developing a vision, shaping community understanding, sharing data, coordinating efforts, creating a learning environment, and connecting people and organizations.
- The character of the people leading backbone organizations is fundamental to success. Leadership characteristics include: visionary, results-oriented, collaborative, focused, adaptive, charismatic, influential, politic, humble, “walks on water...”.

Perceptions of GCF

- Uniquely positioned to influence change.
- Primary roles include funder, capacity builder, being the “voice” of lessons learned, and advocate for collective impact as the approach to achieving large scale systems change.
- Champion, convener, learner, collaborator.

Suggestions for improvement:

- Map investments being made in the region.
- Fund work across multiple organizations.
- Share what is being learned with the field of foundations.
- Mobilize funding for backbone work from other foundations, corporations and government.
- Focus more on policy.
- Encourage more grassroots engagement (public will).

See **Appendix 4** *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article “Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact” co-authored with FSG, July 2012.

What we learned after 18 months of experience

The main “aha” emerging from the second round of evaluation in 2013 was that influence is the best measure of excellence and results for backbone organizations. “One of the major dilemmas

backbone organizations face is how to articulate their role and influence in collective impact efforts ... It is critical that the backbone does not come across as ‘taking credit’ for these efforts.”

See **Appendix 5** *Stanford Social Innovation Review* articles “Exerting Influence without Formal Authority” and “Measuring Backbone Contributions to Collective Impact” co-authored with FSG, December 2013.

Six sources of influence were identified:

1. **competence**: content knowledge, strategic visioning, problem solving, thought leadership, interpersonal skills
2. **commitment**: track record, persistent, reliable, focused
3. **objectivity**: honest broker, common good, convening, connecting the dots
4. **data and information**: understand problems, promote accountability, learn, improve
5. **network**: connections across sectors and constituencies
6. **visibility**: recognition

Influence can be measured in five ways:

1. **leveraged funding**: catalyze, pool or redirect funding
2. **progress on specific initiatives** (deliverables)
3. **evidence of systems change**: shifts in the way decisions are made, resources are allocated, services are delivered
4. **Community level outcomes** (what the data say)
5. **stakeholder perceptions of value (but for...)**: “If the backbone organizations ceased to exist, we would lose culture of collaboration, connections, coordination, networks, credibility and neutrality, momentum and accountability, data-driven approach, and collective power to change policy and mobilize funding.”

Each backbone organization has demonstrated progress (to varying degrees) across the dimensions stated above. We did not conduct another round of stakeholder perceptions for this report, but we did ask the backbone leaders to assess the value of participating in a Community of Practice over the life of the initiative. See *Part III of this report*.

The remainder of this section examines the results achieved in leveraging funding, delivering on goals and promises, changing systems, and helping to “move the needle” on community level outcomes.

1. Influencing Outcomes by Leveraging Funding

Each backbone tracks and reports the amount of funding they leveraged or redirected as a result of their work. The below table summarizes each backbone’s leverage within the timeframe of this investment.

Backbone Organization	New and Aligned Funding 2012-2014
Agenda 360	\$713,000
Green Umbrella	\$2,700,000
LISC	\$171,829,563
Partners for a Competitive Workforce	\$27,500,000
StrivePartnership	\$11,000,000
Success by 6	\$31,500,000
Vision 2015	\$11,725,000
Total	\$256,967,563

2. Influencing Outcomes by Making Progress on Specific Initiatives

Below we highlight some of the many initiatives undertaken by our seven backbone organizations as the lead catalysts in our region. This summary is meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive.

Agenda 360: Regional action plan designed to attract and retain talent, jobs, and provide economic opportunity for all. A talent “toolkit” was created in 2014, and is now being used by major employers’ human resource departments. Community level data indicate a positive net migration of young professionals to Cincinnati for the first time since the launch of Agenda 360. Other young professional programs include “Global Leaders of Tomorrow,” a pilot program with World Affairs Council to increase cultural competence in high schools, and “Table of Eight,” which connected 75 African-American and Black newcomers to Cincinnati. Agenda 360 is developing new programs for the LGBT community and trailing spouses in 2015.

Green Umbrella: Comprehensive approach to sustainability, with significant emphasis on outdoor events and education. Events and education programs include the development of the MeetMeOutdoors.org website, the Great Outdoors Weekend (largest of its kind in the U.S.), Paddlefest (largest paddling event in the country), and Kids Outdoor Expo (largest environmental education event for children in the Midwest). They have also established a Regional Trails Alliance, created a trails master plan, and created the Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council.

LISC: Neighborhood revitalization in the areas of real estate, increasing family income and wealth, stimulating economic development, improving access to quality education, and supporting healthy environments and lifestyles. LISC’s signature initiative Place Matters is in its seventh year of operation. In 2014, they expanded into two additional neighborhoods for a total of five: Avondale, Price Hill, Covington, Walnut Hills, and Madisonville. Significant progress has been made in securing support from the City of Cincinnati, which is now giving funding priority to Place Matters neighborhoods aligned with the City’s consolidated plan. All five neighborhoods received Focus 52 grants. Price Hill was featured in a national LISC publication as an exemplary approach to comprehensive community development.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce: Career pathway development for key growth industries such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, construction, and information technology. The most recent results for the career pathway work reflect more than 7,800 people being served, with 80% obtaining employment and 73% retaining that employment for 12 months (a key milestone). Career pathway participants have seen an annual earnings increase by up to \$7,500, which translates to \$7.3M (aggregate) per year. In 2015, PCW will evaluate the feasibility of developing additional career pathways in finance/insurance, education, transportation, and distribution and logistics industries. The STEM collaborative Talent Pipeline Project has engaged 1,300 students and 500 adults, and 70+ active collaborators including business.

Strive Partnership: Improving student outcomes in the urban core. Example initiatives include the “Be the Change” tutoring program, the Persistence Project (K-12 alignment with postsecondary education and retention by reducing the need for math remediation), and the Every Child Capital Fund to achieve grade-level reading literacy by third grade.

Success By 6: Focused on school readiness by increasing effective parent engagement strategies such as best practice home visitation, and increasing access to high quality early childhood education. Fifty-seven percent of preschool programs are quality rated in Northern Kentucky and Southwest Ohio, which is up significantly from 27% quality rated programs at baseline.

Vision 2015: Northern Kentucky’s regional plan. In 2014, Vision 2015 engaged 16,000 people in MyNKy, which was an inclusive process to identify the region’s priorities for 2016-2020. They also created a workforce coalition to develop a strategy for attracting, educating, and graduating more advanced manufacturing students in Northern Kentucky.

One of the collateral benefits (or “unintended serendipities”) of creating a community of practice among all seven backbone organizations is that the groups were able to collaborate on issues of such significant scale that no one of them could lead the work alone:

- **2020 Jobs Outlook:** This study was a collaboration among Agenda 360, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, The Strive Partnership, and Vision 2015. The report forecasted where we expect our region’s jobs to be in 2020 and what education and training will be in highest demand. This report is used to prepare our workforce for in-demand jobs, and help job seekers and students understand the education and training required for jobs with high growth potential and good wages. It is also used to help our region’s educational institutions align academic programs, curriculum, and credentials to better respond to labor market needs. The Women’s Fund of GCF recently built upon this work by disaggregating the data by gender and analyzing it by living wage standards.
- **Green Umbrella** was incubated by Agenda 360 and Vision 2015. Each of their regional plans had identified environmental challenges and sustainability as an important priority. However, the comprehensive nature of the work led them to create a new backbone organization to focus on environmental sustainability.
- **Preschool Promise:** The Strive Partnership and Success by 6 are working together to advance public funding for the Preschool Promise to provide universal access to quality preschool for every three and four year old child in Cincinnati. Recently, the business community, the Mayor, and Hamilton County Commissioners have signed on to help get this goal accomplished. Across the river, Vision 2015 and Success by 6 are laying

similar groundwork for a Northern Kentucky Preschool Promise because access to high quality preschool was identified as the top priority through the MyNKY community planning process.

- Through the design thinking technical assistance process provided to the cohort in 2014, Success by 6 and the Strive Partnership have developed a prototype for creating “Early Childhood Champions” — an approach to engage parents as ambassadors for quality preschool. They will pilot this approach in Middletown and Covington in 2015.
- **FACTS Matter Community Web Portal:** All seven backbone organizations are providing key community-level data in a central data repository funded by GCF, United Way, Interact for Health, and the Haile/U.S Bank Foundation.

3. Influence on Systems Change

Below we highlight some of the ways in which our seven backbone organizations have served as catalysts for change in policy and how our service delivery systems operate. This summary is meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive.

Agenda 360 has changed the conversation around diversity and inclusion in our community with its Diverse by Design initiative. It has shifted the focus from a moral imperative to a business imperative. There are five action teams with over 400 volunteers, 150+ companies, and organizations involved. It has contributed to more than a dozen programs in 2014 that will increase our region’s ability to attract and retain top talent, while diversifying and making our workforce more competitive.

Green Umbrella has engaged 235 corporate, government and nonprofit partners along with over 150 individual members. Together they have set a community goal to have our region recognized as one of the top 10 most sustainable metro areas in the U.S. by 2020. They have formed eight action teams and established shared outcomes to track their progress over time. This is indicative of collaboration and alignment among cross-sector partners who have not historically worked together, let alone shared a common goal and measures.

LISC has created community safety initiatives in partnership with police officers, business owners, the community development organizations, residents, and property owners that have resulted in a significant reduction of crime in four neighborhoods.

PCW has increased the number of people trained, employed, and retained; instituted common work readiness comps/assessments; and built a 50-agency reporting system.

Strive Partnership has led the advocacy effort for the Cincinnati Preschool Promise, which will provide access to quality preschool for every three and four year old in Cincinnati. A community awareness campaign will launch in early 2015, which is anticipated to lead to a ballot initiative in the next year.

Success by 6: Fifty-seven percent of kindergarteners are entering Cincinnati Public Schools prepared to learn (up from a baseline of 44%), and 53% in Northern Kentucky are entering kindergarten prepared. Ninety-five percent of children receiving quality home visitation are on track in cognitive and social/emotional development.

Vision 2015: Creation of the Catalytic Fund changed the gameboard for community development in Northern Kentucky, and the \$10 million fund has already realized \$100 million in total impact for the region. Creating UpTech has spurred entrepreneurial activity and increased venture capital in Northern Kentucky.

4. Influence on Community Level Impact

Although GCF's most recent investment in these backbones began in 2012, the Foundation helped to start most of these organizations, and in some cases, has been funding them for more than a decade (e.g., LISC, Success by 6). This is important to understand as a perspective in this evaluation because it is very difficult, if not impossible, to "move the needle" on community-level outcomes in just three years.

Agenda 360 (2009) & Vision 2015 (2005 after transition from Forward Quest). The 2014 Regional Indicators Report shows that Cincinnati has moved up to #9 overall of 12 peer regions, an increase from the #10 spot in 2010 (baseline). Specific improvements against this peer index were made in the number of knowledge jobs, the housing opportunity index, the cost of living index, average wages, per capita income, and unemployment rates.

Green Umbrella (2012, started by Agenda 360 and Vision 2015). Each of the eight action teams have established key community measures, which they will track and report against annually. This is groundbreaking work in this sector, as little to no community-level measures of environmental sustainability existed prior to 2014.

LISC (2000). The Building Sustainable Communities national evaluation of LISC concludes that in neighborhoods where LISC invests heavily, jobs and incomes each grew 9% more than in similar communities having little or no investment. This shows that LISC's approach to comprehensive community development improves the quality of life for low-income families in a significant way. In addition to these national results, crime rates have decreased in four neighborhoods due to safety initiatives created by LISC.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce (2008). A quasi-experimental design evaluation commissioned by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions shows that the career pathway efforts of PCW are highly effective. Pathway participants have 40% greater employment rates and earn almost 60% higher wages than traditional job seekers earn.

Strive Partnership (2006). The community's report card for 2013-14 shows that 91% of educational success indicators in Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport are trending in a positive direction.

Success by 6 (2004) started tracking kindergarten readiness indicators in 2006. Now, 57% of kindergarteners enter Cincinnati Public Schools prepared to learn (up from a baseline of 44%), and 53% of children in Northern Kentucky enter kindergarten prepared. Ninety-five percent (95%) of children receiving quality home visitation (Every Child Succeeds) are on track in cognitive and social/emotional development. Fifty-seven percent of preschool programs are quality rated in Northern Kentucky and Southwest Ohio, up from a baseline of 27%. Ninety-one percent of children in United Way funded Quality Early Care and Education programs are developmentally on track.

Part III: Assessing the Value of a Community of Practice

Along with providing five years of core operating support, we also created a community of practice (COP) which included each backbone organization. The COP facilitated ongoing shared learning and collaboration opportunities among the cohort. In 2012, we focused primarily on the creation of the shared theory of change, identifying the six core activities of a backbone, and the indicators of effectiveness for each activity area. Based on these core activity areas, we surveyed key stakeholders to determine effectiveness, and built out technical assistance in areas that were identified as opportunities for improvement.

In 2013, we expanded the COP to include ArtsWave, the Women's Fund, and an emerging collective impact initiative in the health sector. We focused the technical assistance around communications; specifically by engaging Andy Goodman who trained our backbone leaders and their partners in the art of systems change storytelling.

In 2014, we engaged Design Impact to train the cohort on embedding design thinking into their work; specifically to address building community will. A summary of this work is currently being submitted for publication in the Stanford Social Innovation review.

At our first COP meeting of the year in January 2015, the backbone leaders discussed the value of being a part of such a group. There was consensus that the cohort approach added significant value to the core funding each organization is receiving.

Several examples were cited, including:

1. The cohort further enhanced the collective impact approach to large-scale social change.
 - "It allowed Success by 6 to think differently about how to organize our work, enabling us to move to a regional center of excellence approach."
 - "It has changed thinking, and ultimately culture, of how the community solves big problems."
2. It made working at the systems level more understandable and valued by other funders and stakeholders in the community.
3. It has elevated Cincinnati's work nationally, has influenced the national dialogue on collective impact, and has identified the critical elements needed to effectively practice a collective impact approach.
4. The flexible "change capital" aspect of the funding is valuable.
 - "It allows you to contemplate the impossible."
 - "It enabled us to spend more time evaluating initiatives and creating a more balanced portfolio to comprehensively affect change because we didn't have to chase money."
 - "Being an effective backbone requires boldness. You are contemplating big, challenging, never-before-done things. Flexible funding is a huge part of that."
 - "It provides you the freedom to take risks, pursue new ideas, be nimble, and seize opportunities."
5. The Community of Practice was cited as almost as valuable as the funding itself.

- “The real juice comes from cohort convenings.”
 - “It has built very powerful relationships among backbone organizations, one of trust and respect.”
 - “Our conversations as a cohort have evolved from the hypothetical to the possible.”
 - “It (the COP) is a council of people who think about things at the systems level—what a unique resource!”
 - “This work can be overwhelming, but by convening the cohort, it helps backbone leaders stay focused.”
6. The COP has facilitated exchange of ideas across initiatives, provided new ways of thinking about the work.
7. In 2013, GCF expanded the cohort to include not only the backbones getting core financial support, but also the emerging Cradle Cincinnati infant mortality initiative, the Collective Impact on Health initiative, ArtsWave (who in many ways serves as the backbone in the arts sector), and The Women’s Fund of GCF. Each of these organizations articulated that their involvement in the community of practice has greatly influenced and accelerated the development of their own work.

“The Women’s Fund of GCF recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Charlotte Schmidlapp Fund. That grant would not have happened without what we learned through the cohort. It enabled us to articulate a vision.”

Part IV: Recommendation

Collective Impact has been a strong investment for GCF. The Community Investment Committee recommends funding for years four (2015) and five (2016) of this initiative. Additionally, it was suggested that GCF identify an ongoing funding strategy beyond the initial five year commitment.

Backbone Organization	2015	2016	Total 5 Year Investment
Agenda 360	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$375,000
The Green Umbrella	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$225,000 (only 3 yrs)
LISC/place matters	\$100,000 LISC; \$100,000 place matters	\$100,000 LISC; \$100,000 place matters	\$500,000 LISC; \$500,000 place matters
Partners for a Competitive Workforce	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$500,000
The StrivePartnership	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$400,000
Success by 6	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$375,000
Vision 2015	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$375,000

**Appendix 1
Summary of Backbone Structures**

Backbone	Age in years	Sponsor	# of Staff	Total budget (core vs. projects)	GCF Annual Core Support
Agenda 360	6	Chamber	2.75	\$456,176	\$75,000
Green Umbrella	3	n/a	7.2	\$225k core \$300k project	\$75,000
LISC/Place Matters	14	LISC National	6	\$550,000	\$100,000/ \$100,000
Partners for Competitive Workforce	6.5	United Way	5	\$1.1 million	\$100,000
The Strive Partnership	8	Knowledge-Works Foundation	9	\$1,651,723	\$100,000
Success By 6	11	United Way	5	628,251	\$75,000
Vision 2015	8	n/a	4	\$633,127	\$75,000

Relationships matter: five of the seven backbone organizations are integral parts of other host organizations. While this aspect of backbone performance and success was not specifically analyzed, it appears to be an important contributing feature.

- Agenda 360 gains access to the business community and contributed core support.
- LISC leverages significant national resources for loans and grants.
- Partners for a Competitive Workforce and Success by 6 are anchored in United Way's Bold Goals and receive contributed core support as well as assistance in raising funds.
- The StrivePartnership receives significant core operating support and project funding directly from The KnowledgeWorks Foundation as well as access to thought leadership in education.

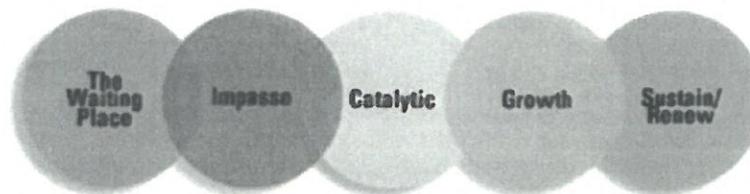
In addition, The Women's Fund is part of GCF, Cradle Cincinnati is sponsored by Cincinnati Children Hospital Medical Center, and The Collective Impact on Health Initiative is part of the Health Collaborative.

That said, both Green Umbrella and Vision 2015 have been very successful at engaging stakeholders across topics and sectors, leading initiatives around specific goals and strategies, and generating the financial support needed to serve as a catalyst for change. Finally, ArtsWave is the oldest and most successful united arts campaign in the country and broadened its mission several years ago to demonstrate the community impact of the arts.

This may be an area for further discussion and analysis.



The Harwood Index: 5 Stages of Community Life



Communities evolve in stages. Learn about the stages below.

THE WAITING PLACE

- In the Waiting Place, people sense that things are not working right in their community, but they are unable to clearly define the problem; the feeling could be described as a "felt unknown"
- People feel disconnected from leaders and from different processes within the community for making decisions; the community itself is fragmented; discussion about common challenges is infrequent and/or highly divisive.
- Community discussion about challenges is infrequent and/or highly divisive. People want to create change, but negative norms for public life keep them locked into old patterns.
- People often are waiting - for issues to become clearer, for someone else to "solve" their problems. People in this stage often say, "Everything will be better when we get the right mayor to save the community!" So, People just wait.

IMPASSE

- At Impasse, the community has hit rock bottom, and people can be heard saying, "Enough is enough! It can't go on like this any longer!"
- In this stage, unlike in the Waiting Place, there is a sense of urgency in people's voices; people are tired of "waiting." But while people want change, they lack clarity of what to do.
- The community's norms and ways of working together keep the community stuck in an undesirable status quo. The community is mired in turf wars; it lacks of leadership at different levels of the community; and people seem fixated on their own individual interests.
- People's frustrations have hit the boiling point but the community lacks the capacity to act.

CATALYTIC

- The Catalytic stage starts with small steps that are often imperceptible to the vast majority of people in the community.
- Small numbers of people and organizations begin to emerge, taking risks and experimenting in ways that challenge existing norms in how the community works.
- The size of their actions is not the vital gauge. Their actions produce some semblance of results that gives people a sense of hope.
- People feel renewed spirit of community. More people are working together. Efforts are taking place across the community and are targeted to more concerns.
- A feature of this stage is that you can randomly ask people on the street what kind of community they live in, and they provide similar answers. A common story has emerged about the community.

GROWTH

- During the Growth stage, people begin to see clearer and more pervasive signs of how the community is moving forward.
- People in the community are able to name leadership at all levels and where such leadership is expanding and deepening - from the official level to neighborhoods, within civic organizations and non-profits. Networks are growing and sense of common purpose and direction are taking deep root.
- People feel renewed spirit of community. More people are working together. Efforts are taking place across the community and are targeted to more concerns.
- A feature of this stage is that you can randomly ask people on the street what kind of community they live in, and they provide similar answers. A common story has emerged about the community.

SUSTAIN AND RENEW

- In Sustain and Renew, the community is ready to take on, in a deeper and more sustained way, the tough, nagging issues that may have been tackled before but were not adequately addressed.
- Such issues might include the public schools, racism and race relations, and economic growth in all neighborhoods' change on these concerns typically requires sustained, long-term effort.
- Lessons and insights and new norms that have emerged over time now pervade the community.
- But, the community may be struggling to maintain its momentum. It must find new ways to bring along a new cadre of leaders, civic groups, and active citizens, as other tire or move on.
- There is a danger that community will fall into a new Waiting Place as it comes to rest on its laurels.

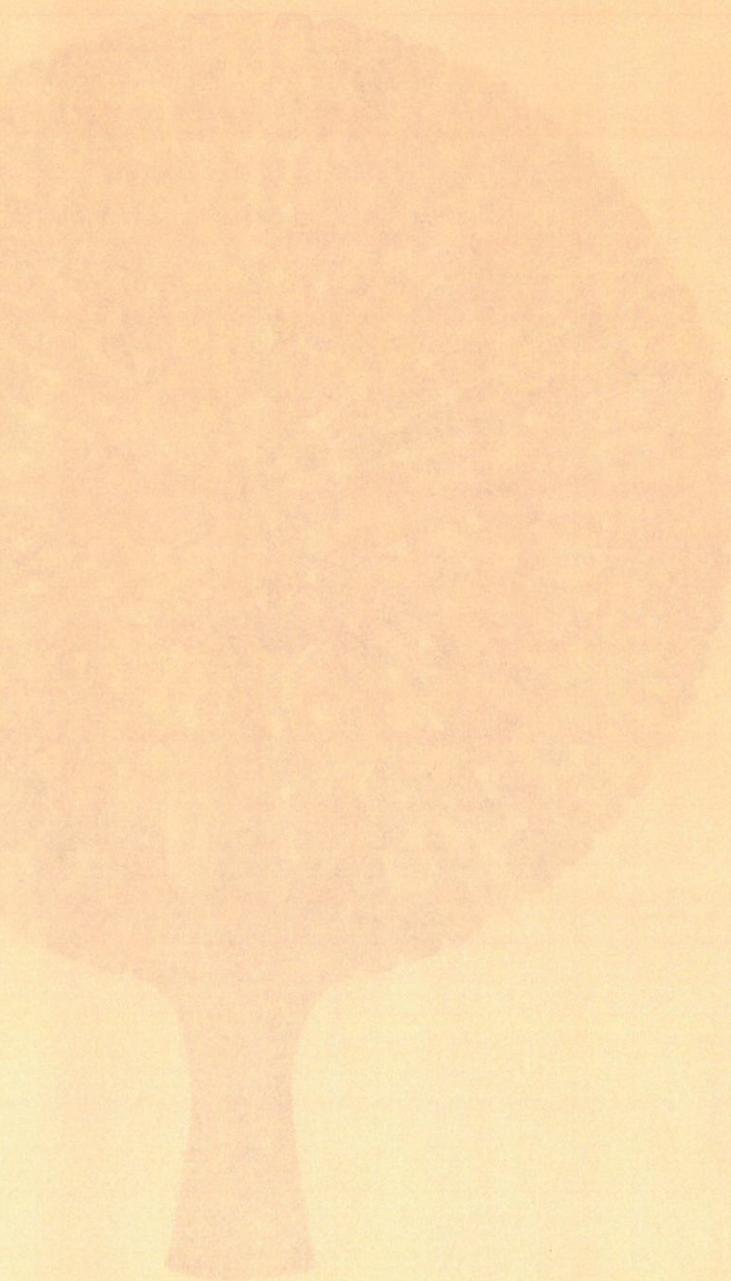
Appendix 3

Design, Implementation, and Evaluation Timeline

September 2011	GCF Governing Board approved \$3 million for six backbone organizations over five years, plus technical assistance and other evaluation work (up to \$600,000)
April 2012	Baseline reports prepared by FSG Social Impact Consultants
December 2012	First progress report to the Governing Board
March 2013	First progress report to the Community Investment Committee
August 2013	First backbone-level and aggregate evaluation reports (FSG)
September 2013	Analysis of 2013 progress
December 2013	Second progress report to the Governing Board
June 30, 2014	Initiative midpoint
July 2014	Request for Proposals issued to evaluation consultants
September 2014	Pause evaluation process: revise approach, conduct internal review
January 2015	Backbones provide 2014 Dashboards and evaluation narrative reports
February 2015	Present report to GCF's Community Investment Committee
March 2015	Present report to GCF's Governing Board

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS IN COLLECTIVE IMPACT





About Collective Impact

No single organization alone has the ability to solve the world's most challenging problems. Collective Impact occurs when actors from different sectors commit to a common agenda for solving a specific social or environmental problem. FSG's Collective Impact services include design and launch of initiatives, facilitation of strategic efforts, and development of shared measurement systems. Learn more at www.fsg.org.

About FSG

FSG is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation, and research. We help organizations discover better ways to solve social problems. FSG was originally founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group, and today works across all sectors in every region of the globe, partnering with corporations, foundations, nonprofits, and governments to achieve critical social change. Learn more at www.fsg.org.

About The Greater Cincinnati Foundation

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation helps people make the most of their giving to build a better community. We believe in the power of philanthropy to change the lives of people and communities. As a community foundation, GCF creates a prosperous Greater Cincinnati by investing in thriving people and vibrant places. An effective steward of the community's charitable resources since 1963, the Foundation inspires philanthropy in eight counties in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. www.gcfdn.org

Understanding the Value of **BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS** in Collective Impact

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work

BY SHILOH TURNER, KATHY MERCHANT, JOHN KANIA AND ELLEN MARTIN

This article is adapted from its original publication in July 2012 as a four-part blog series in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, www.ssireview.org/blog.

Effective backbone support is a critical condition for collective impact. In fact, it is the number one reason that collective impact initiatives fail. In this publication, we provide communities and organizations engaged in collective impact with guidance on the role of the backbone and how to understand and support its effectiveness.

In the Greater Cincinnati region, collective impact has become the “new normal,” and The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) has made a commitment to support the infrastructure of collective impact – the backbone organization itself – in an effort to sustain and scale long-term systemic change and impact in the community. However, the role of the backbone organization in collective impact is complex and can be difficult to explain.

In early 2012, The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and FSG began a partnership to define the value of backbone organizations and better understand backbone effectiveness by working with six local backbone organizations and collective impact initiatives.

We learned that backbone organizations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities

3. Establish shared measurement practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

Over time, backbone organizations can expect these activities to lead to changes among partners, funders, policymakers, and community members which, in turn, lead to more effective systems and improved community outcomes.

Through our research, we also gained insight into the value of backbone organizations and their leaders. Across organizations, the value of backbone support was commonly viewed as unmistakable; individual partners could not do the work of collective impact without it. In addition, backbone leaders must possess certain key characteristics that make them effective in the complex collective impact environment. Yet beyond these commonalities, the way that each backbone organization approaches the role varies depending on their context.

As a result of our work, GCF and FSG have created a community of practice of six regional backbone organizations. Through our process, backbone organizations are using the data we've collected to inform their individual work. They are also finding synergies among the group and taking opportunities to leverage each other's efforts to feed common goals.

I. MAKING A COMMITMENT TO STRENGTHEN BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS

Communities and organizations around the world are adopting a different mindset to achieve large-scale systemic change through collective impact, a concept that was first introduced in the winter 2011 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and more recently discussed on the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* blog. As cross-sector groups engage more deeply in this practice, funders and practitioners alike find ourselves probing for answers to the question: How do you do this work well?

In Cincinnati, the collective impact model is a living, breathing—and evolving—practice. The community has embraced this approach to accelerating change across systems. And the community’s leaders are committing to making this ambitious work succeed.

GCF is leading the way for collective impact in the region. As a funder, GCF believes that providing “backbone support” (see text

box) which propels collective impact efforts is critically important. The foundation has taken a bold, if not “sexy,”¹ step by investing in the support infrastructure of collective impact—the backbone organization itself—to accelerate change. If the Foundation is to succeed, everyone must understand what backbone organizations are and how they can be most effective.

In January 2012, GCF and FSG began exploring four big questions with a cohort of the region’s backbone organizations:

- How and to what extent are backbone organizations **effective catalysts** for achieving community-level progress?
- How and to what extent do backbone organizations contribute to improved social outcomes?
- How is **success** best measured for backbone organizations?
- What **common challenges and best practices** can be shared across backbone organizations?

We are sharing our experience to help funders

see backbone support as a strategy to advance collective impact initiatives. We hope to build a common language and understanding for the role and value of backbone organizations so that all partners in a collective impact effort can articulate the need for and the importance of this vital element, and ensure the overall success of an initiative.

Cincinnati’s “New Normal”

In Cincinnati, collaboration is the “new normal,” but this was not always the case. Like many regions, individual organizations and initiatives were doing important and effective work. But the overall economy still lagged behind its peers around the country. For this community, the collective impact model developed, almost organically, as organizations convened collaboratives and coalitions to invent more effective methods for creating powerful and lasting social change. Over the last 10 years or so, many strong backbone organizations were created to coordinate community initiatives and accelerate change. GCF played an important role in funding, incubating, or otherwise supporting many of these initiatives.

As an anchor institution, GCF has taken the long view on complex social problems when few others could; it has evidence that progress can be made when the community sticks with large-scale initiatives. Supporting collective impact has been a natural evolution in GCF’s community leadership. The Foundation believes that, by providing change capital to a group of backbone organizations, it will be able to accelerate progress toward social change in the region.

GCF and FSG’s Work Together

In addition to a leveraged, multi-year funding strategy, GCF chose to invest in evaluating the work of a cohort of backbone organizations and in creating a community of practice among them. Using this ap-

Collective Impact: Five Key Conditions for Shared Success

Common Agenda	All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions
Shared Measurement	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action
Continuous Communication	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies

¹ Jen Landres. Is “Unsexy” In? The Center for High Impact Philanthropy at the School of Social Policy & Practice, University of Pennsylvania <http://blog.impact.upenn.edu/2012/06/20/is-unsexy-in/>

If the Foundation is to succeed, everyone must understand what backbone organizations are and how they can be most effective.

proach, regardless of sector or issue, these organizations would learn from each other, continuously improve their practice, and encourage greater collaboration across overlapping initiatives. GCF engaged FSG to assist in this work. As a nonprofit strategy, evaluation, and research consulting firm, FSG believes evaluation is a powerful way to inform strategy and help organizations learn. The firm's strategic learning and evaluation practice helps individual organizations and groups design and implement program evaluations, shared measurement systems, and organizational evaluation systems.

In early 2012, GCF and FSG began a partnership built around evaluating backbone effectiveness and answering the above four questions. GCF selected six backbone organizations (see text box) to participate that are all beyond the initial "start-up" phase of forming their collective impact initiatives, and are refining and sustaining their initiatives. They all have at least one full-time staff person, but operate using a lean staffing model and mobilize many partners to help further their work. While the issue areas they address have some overlap, there are clear differences in the breadth and depth of the initiatives, the scope of the

backbone organizations' role, and the context in which they do their work.

GCF's Challenge

The work of a backbone organization is complex. The roles played in accelerating change can be challenging to articulate as, by design, their work is largely behind the scenes. Therefore, GCF's new approach to community leadership means that evaluating and communicating the value of backbone organizations has become all the more important. In addition, defining and communicating what "effectiveness" really means is another driver of the Foundation's work. The backbone organization is an emerging concept necessary in the collective impact approach. GCF needs to paint a clear picture for stakeholders—board members, staff, donors, volunteers, current and potential grant recipients—of what success looks like and why this strategy is ultimately worth pursuing. This is the challenge and task before us.

Key Learning: What Backbone Organizations Do

It is tempting to say (and our backbone organizations feel) that there are as many backbone models as there are collective impact initiatives. However, we found that there is, at some level, a common theory of change for backbone organizations that ultimately seeks to improve social outcomes by organizing cross-sector groups of partners to transform an often inefficient, fragmented system.

In order to fulfill this vision—regardless of their focus area—backbone organizations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measurement practices

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation's Cohort of Backbone Organizations

Agenda 360 advances regional economic competitiveness as a program of the Cincinnati USA Chamber of Commerce

LISC's Place Matters supports comprehensive community development in Greater Cincinnati neighborhoods with investment from a consortium of philanthropic funders and the national organization LISC

Partners for a Competitive Workforce improves regional workforce development efforts, housed by United Way of Greater Cincinnati

The Strive Partnership is a cradle to career initiative that focuses on improving outcomes for children and students in the urban core

Success By 6 focuses on improving early childhood education and kindergarten readiness, also housed by United Way

Vision 2015 supports economic competitiveness in Northern Kentucky and is closely aligned with Agenda 360 across the river

SOURCE: BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS

4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

As a collective impact initiative initially launches and gets organized, a backbone organization is likely to prioritize *guiding vision and strategy* and *supporting aligned activities* as two key activities. For example, in 2006, the Strive Partnership established the first ever "Cradle to Career" vision for the region's urban core, including a roadmap for student success with shared goals and measures of student achievement. For the past six years, the Strive Partnership has maintained an active and engaged executive committee comprised of cross-sector leadership from Cincinnati (OH), Covington, and Newport (KY) to ensure that the shared vision and strategy

continues to guide the work of the partners.

Another example highlights two regional backbones working across state lines to address a large-scale issue. Recognizing a leadership gap in the area of environmental sustainability, Vision 2015 (KY) and Agenda 360 (OH) have played a critical role in organizing and incubating an intermediary organization, Green Umbrella. With their support, Green Umbrella has brought together several organizations—including many of the region's businesses, education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies—to sustainably develop and grow the Greater Cincinnati area.

As backbone organizations mature, they often shift focus to *establish shared measurement practices* on behalf of their collective impact partners. For example, Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW), with its partners, has created a common, region-wide workforce data collection and reporting system to track results and improve performance for multiple agencies. To date, approximately 50 public and nonprofit agencies are utilizing the system, and a regional workforce dashboard is being built to aggregate key measures. Agenda 360 and Vision 2015 have also begun to identify and report on shared measures around several issues in the region as part of their regional indicators effort.

As backbone organizations seek to expand their impact and build a stronger community presence, they are likely to increase focus on other key external activities such as building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. For GCF's cohort, these activities are by and large still areas for continued development and improvement, though we are seeing some early successes.

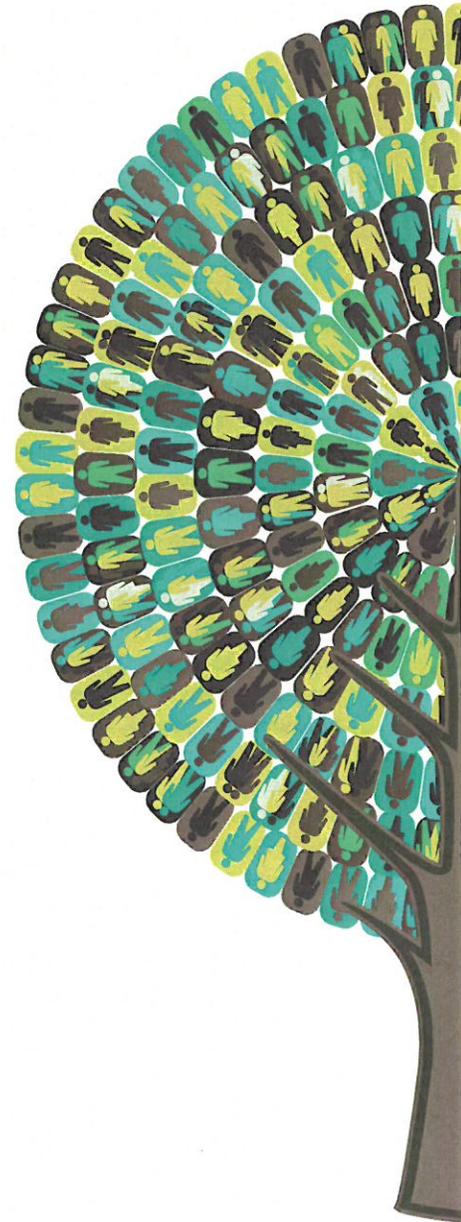
In order to *build public will*, LISC works with its neighborhood partners to engage community members at the grassroots level. Its Place Matters neighborhoods have generated increased attention from the city's elect-

ed officials and policymakers. As an example, neighborhood leaders have taken on foreclosure as a policy issue, successfully bringing together diverse groups in the community to formulate a foreclosure response. Working with the city and courts, they have helped pass local legislation to mitigate the impact of foreclosure on their communities.

At the state level, Success By 6 is *advancing policy* by using local best practices and outcomes to educate policymakers and elected officials in Ohio and Kentucky about effective strategies to improve kindergarten readiness. Through its focus on measuring progress and using data to inform their work, Success By 6 and its partners have influenced the states' thinking about measurement systems and the development of kindergarten readiness standards. Success By 6 is actively involved in efforts to create aligned early education and care systems, with membership on state committees such as the Early Childhood Advisory Council in Ohio and Kentucky. The work of Early Childhood Advisory Councils in both states created a comprehensive vision for early childhood which resulted in securing a \$70 million Race to the Top Early Challenge Grant in Ohio. Through its committee participation, Success By 6 has played a role in defining elements of the system, identifying gaps in service and making the case for investing more in the region's youngest children.

In order to *mobilize funding* for its partners, PCW is coordinating funds from diverse sources to support common priorities and strategies. Since 2008, PCW has leveraged more than \$25 million in public and private funds from local, state, and national sources toward shared goals and strategies. This includes \$4.6 million in philanthropic funds, \$8.5 million in state and federal grants, and \$11.9 million in aligned training funds from the region's public workforce system.

The above examples illustrate how individual backbone organizations have ap-





Backbone Outcomes

Activity	Short-term Outcomes (Illustrative)	Intermediate Outcomes (Illustrative)
Guide vision and strategy	Partners share a common understanding of the need and desired result	Partners' individual work is increasingly aligned with the initiative's common agenda
Support aligned activities	Partners increasingly communicate and coordinate their activities toward common goals	Partners collaboratively develop new approaches to advance the initiative
Establish shared measurement practices	Partners understand the value of sharing data	Partners increasingly use data to adapt and refine their strategies
Build public will	Guide vision and strategy	More community members feel empowered to take action on the issue(s)
Advance policy	Partners increasingly communicate and coordinate their activities toward common goals	Policy changes increasingly occur in line with initiative goals
Mobilize funding	Funding is secured to support initiative activities	Philanthropic and public funds are increasingly aligned with initiative goals

proached these key activities. Yet, as we've learned by looking across the cohort, each organization engages in these activities to different degrees and in different ways, depending on the context and capacity of the organization and the scope and maturity of the initiative.

Why It Matters: Expected Backbone Outcomes

When asked how they know their work is making a difference, backbone leaders almost always talk about evidence of moving the needle on big community indicators, such as increasing the percentage of young people who enter kindergarten ready to learn. In fact, these six organizations already track progress on "big picture" indicators on behalf of their partners. But the focus of the GCF evaluation has been different.

Individual interviews and group working sessions generated the short-term and inter-

mediate outcomes that could demonstrate the influence of backbone organizations' activities on results of the collective impact *process*. Defining backbone process outcomes was an important step to tie the influence of their work to long-term initiative- and community-level outcomes. Some examples of expected outcomes generated by backbone organizations are listed above.

Based on the common activities and outcomes we defined, FSG asked external stakeholders and the backbone leaders themselves to assess their activities and contributions in each of the six areas, including the relative importance of each area, and to tell us what difference the backbone organizations had made in their respective collective impact efforts. Because assessing poses a significant challenge for many backbone organizations, FSG asked their stakeholders to complete the sentence, "If not for *x* backbone organization, *y, z* would not have hap-

2. *Community of practice* is defined as a group of people with common professions or interests that convene with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. (Adapted from Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice)

pened in our community.”

Through surveys and interviews, we gathered compelling data. And as we completed the baseline analyses this spring, we grew excited to share the illuminating perspectives of roughly 130 stakeholders with the backbone leaders.

III. RESULTS OF INQUIRY: WHAT WE LEARNED

We heard many valuable perspectives on the backbone organizations’ work from partners, funders, advisors, and community members. Our key insights are summarized below.

1. Their value is unmistakable. If not for the backbone organizations’ contributions, stakeholders believe that “even more decisions in our community would be made by a small group of folks,” “communities would be simply in survival mode,” “the public wouldn’t have near the understanding of the challenges,” and “there wouldn’t be any coordinated program at all.” As one stakeholder said, “If they weren’t asking the right questions, we wouldn’t be [where we are today.]” In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support. These representative comments help the backbones articulate their value and purpose to stakeholders.

2. GCF’s backbone cohort shares strengths in guiding vision and strategy and supporting aligned activities. All six backbone organizations received the highest marks for their effectiveness in these core areas. Interviewees said: “Prior to the establishment of [the backbone organization], our community lacked a collective direction for our region,” and “[the backbone organizations] bring a lot of people together; they are out understanding what activities are going on and how to align them.” The backbone leaders have been attentive to delivering value to their partners in these areas and are likely to

continue to do so to maintain momentum. Furthermore, **some backbones were also recognized for mobilizing funding**, as exemplified through their success winning a Social Innovation Fund grant and other national funding opportunities.

3. Backbone organizations shift focus over time. By and large, this cohort of six backbone organizations has not yet placed a great deal of emphasis on *building public will* or *advancing policy*, but all expect to

In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support.

increase their time allocations and capacity in these areas in the future. Backbone organization leaders and their stakeholders alike feel that there is a natural progression from guiding vision and strategy, supporting *aligned activities*, and *establishing shared measurement practices*—all “inner circle,” partnership-focused activities—to gradually building toward broader externally-focused, community-level activities. For many, attention is beginning to shift to incorporating more external-facing activities into their work.

4. Backbone organizations’ partners need ongoing assistance with data. Although *establishing shared measurement practices* was seen broadly as a strength of many of the backbone organizations, building part-

ners’ capacity to contribute and use data in a shared measurement system is a common area for improvement. As one partner described, “We do not have enough manpower to input data.” Backbones with limited staff capacity found it particularly challenging to consider taking on a greater technical assistance role in this area.

5. External communications, building public will, and advancing policy are common backbone challenges. We heard many stakeholders encourage the backbone organizations to improve communications about their own value and progress on the initiative. For example, we heard that “people don’t know what is being accomplished,” and “it’s hard to know how much progress they are making against their goals.” This mirrors the challenge we mentioned in Part I around articulating the backbone organizations’ value. In addition, stakeholders spoke of the need to build a more intentional strategy around public will and advocacy: “Even if there is not a lot of money available, to shape the public mind as to what the issues are is terribly important.” Most of the backbone organizations recognized that these areas needed additional attention and capacity, though they were also reluctant to place too much emphasis on advocacy without a clear opportunity to advance policy in a specific, targeted area.

While evaluation findings revealed many commonalities across backbone organizations, there were also several organization-specific challenges. For example, one organization has been pulled in too many directions and is now likely spread too thin to be very effective in all areas. Another needs to enlist more partners representing a broader cross-section of the region in order to effectively tackle the scope of the initiative. As GCF and the backbone leaders considered the relative

For those who are considering how to undertake or support a collective impact initiative, one fundamental truth about backbone effectiveness is that its leader can make or break the organization's success.

importance of the messages emerging from the data, we started to identify the contextual nuances that can affect backbone performance, such as:

- The **phase** of the collective impact initiative (for example, whether the backbone is helping to initiate action, organize for impact, or sustain action and impact)
- The **capacity** of the backbone organization (for example, headcount, areas of expertise, financial resources)
- The **geographic reach and scope** of the collective impact effort (for example, one neighborhood versus a three-state region, early childhood learning versus community development)
- **Structural** opportunities and constraints created by a parent organization (for example, independent nonprofit versus program underneath a local chapter of a national network of organizations)

For many backbone organizations, the evaluation findings confirmed and clarified what

they instinctively knew already about their work. FSG's independent work had the additional benefit of providing a vehicle and forum for sharing the backbone organizations' stories, raising awareness about common issues, and generating learning opportunities. The findings from our baseline assessment launched us into our hoped-for community of practice,² and a new set of opportunities for learning and technical assistance over the coming months.

IV. WHAT NEXT? LEADING AND LEARNING INTO THE FUTURE

When GCF invested in supporting the core budgets of six local backbone organizations over a period of five years, the Foundation also undertook a broader effort to support evaluation and develop a community of practice for these grant recipients. Since January 2012, GCF and FSG have been focused on launching the latter effort.

A key question guiding our evaluation has been: How and to what extent are backbone organizations effective catalysts for achieving community-level progress? In FSG's previous work on collective impact, reported in "Channeling Change," the "intangibles" of the work—a key one is *leadership identification and development*—can be incredibly important in driving the progress of an initiative. In our baseline data collection, stakeholders shared with FSG their deep convictions and heartfelt sentiments about the backbone leaders they know best. In aggregate, the synthesized feedback confirmed a compelling picture of the importance of effective leadership among backbone organizations and the potential of collective impact overall. (See text box)

For those who are considering how to undertake or support a collective impact initiative, one fundamental truth about backbone effectiveness is that its leader can make or

break the organization's success. This component of the evaluation captures some of the intangible "secret sauce" that helps us understand the backbone role going forward.

As the GCF-FSG team looks back on our process, we heavily front-loaded the first six months of developing the evaluation and technical assistance aspect of GCF's funding initiative in order to ensure that it was built on a solid foundation. We established a community of practice with the cohort of backbone organizations. We developed the common theory of change across backbone organizations, as well as individual logic models. We conducted the baseline assessment of each

Common Characteristics of Effective Backbone Leadership

Visionary "In addition to setting the agenda items, she has a very clear vision of where we need to focus and has the ability to drive focus towards those."

Results-Oriented "This is a really results-oriented staff, and they are constantly pushing the community and all of us to not just talk about something, but to act on it."

Collaborative, Relationship Builder "[Her] style is a collaborator, consensus builder, she works very well with partners. We do a good job with making everyone feel like they're important."

Focused, but Adaptive "[There is a] combination of laser focus, a willingness to listen to almost any idea, [and an ability to] cut to the chase and not act on every idea. They are so focused on being sure that whatever is done is focused on the end goal."

Charismatic and Influential Communicator "[She] is extraordinarily articulate and passionate about her work and...she is a true leader in the field."

Politically Savvy "Probably a little political savvy, and more of an ability to filter what they say than I have. [He] understands when to listen."

Humble "[He] sees himself as a 'servant-leader'."

SOURCE: FSG INTERVIEWS

² *Community of practice* is defined as a group of people with common professions or interests that convene with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. (Adapted from Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice)

backbone organization. And we established a shared learning agenda to provide ongoing technical assistance. Now we can step back, take a deep breath, and reflect on what's next.

For GCF, the Foundation plans to continue to “learn in public,” as Beth Kanter says,³ by sharing the lessons we learned with local funders and other community partners. One way GCF plans to do this is by convening a local community conversation around collective impact this fall. In Cincinnati, the community has been so busy doing collective impact that leaders haven't actually stepped back to reflect on the mechanics or importance of the work. The purpose of the community convening is to make sure that everyone is on the same page about what collective impact is, to share how GCF and the backbone organizations are using the model to drive change, and to discuss and solidify everyone's role in advancing the work. GCF will bring together the boards, volunteers, and partners of GCF and other funders, as well as the backbone organizations, to establish a common understanding of collective impact.

GCF also plans to share this learning with the field, initially via publications, such as *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, social media channels, conference presentations, and perhaps ultimately through a more formal white paper. Besides sharing what we have learned, GCF also needs to hone its communications and messaging about the approach. The foundation needs to succinctly answer the questions: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? What do we expect success to look like? GCF is off to a good start answering the first question through a slide presentation and video⁴ that adopts a rowing metaphor to communicate what the model looks like, and specifically, to provide greater detail about each core tenet in the model. We found that this subject matter is complicated and tends to be very heavy on jargon, so the Foundation will continue to make an effort to improve in

Less than six months into the development of the community of practice, we are already seeing synergy across groups.

its own communications. Together with FSG, GCF has also developed a reporting template and dashboard that will help easily communicate results of the funding initiative.

GCF's backbone grant recipients are already using what they've learned to inform and improve their work. Each has taken results back to their governing leadership, partners, and core supporters to discuss the implications their evaluation results have for their work. One backbone organization is challenging its current evaluation process and looking to collect more granular, neighborhood-level data. It has also researched best practices on effective communications strategies to show both quantitative and qualitative results, and has hired a communications team to develop a communications plan. Other backbone organizations are using the six core activities framework to help align their organizational structure around each activity area, and ensure that key activities are otherwise properly resourced.

Less than six months into the development of the community of practice, we are already seeing synergy across groups. Vision 2015, Agenda 360, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, and the Strive Partnership are working together on a labor market study

called “2020 Job Outlook.” Four backbone organizations will share resources—leadership, connections, and cash—to develop a dataset that can drive the region's collective vision and goals on job training and educational attainment. This example shows true partnership with a common agenda, driving a high impact regional initiative together.

The role of GCF in supporting collective impact also continues to evolve and grow. GCF provides support primarily through its grantmaking and capacity building support of backbone organizations. It has also been a partner in mobilizing funding by aligning its community investment framework⁵ with widely adopted community initiatives. And GCF has collaborated with United Way of Greater Cincinnati to lead the community dialogue around further refinement of shared community outcomes and measures

FSG plans to expand the depth of its support for those groups pursuing collective impact by further exploring what it means to be a backbone organization. FSG also has other research efforts underway to develop insights on shared measurement, the role of funders, and the role that collective impact plays in addressing the complexity of social change. Our work in Cincinnati was discussed at the annual conference of the American Evaluation Association in October 2012.

With this incredible cohort of backbone leaders fully engaged in a community of practice, we now embark upon our next phase of work. We hope that the rationale, process, and results of our experience to date will resonate with other funders and practitioners who are making similar investments and facing similar opportunities and challenges. Creating large-scale systemic change via collective impact is a long-term proposition. Both GCF and FSG are dedicated to providing continued knowledge and tools for Cincinnati and other communities to help speed progress along the way.

5 Beth Kanter, *Learning in public on wikis*. <http://www.bethkanter.org/learning-in-public/>

About the Authors



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Discovering better ways to solve social problems www.FSG.org

Appendix 5

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

MEASURING SOCIAL IMPACT

Exerting Influence Without Formal Authority

Part one of a two-part series on how backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact without formal authority.

By Shiloh Turner, Katherine Errecart, & Anjali Bhatt | Dec. 2, 2013

*Last year, the **Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF)** engaged the nonprofit consulting firm **FSG** to help understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts, which culminated in a four-part blog series for Stanford Social Innovation Review entitled, “**Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact.**” This year, GCF engaged FSG as evaluators to assess the importance of backbone organizations in collective impact, with a targeted focus on the question of how and to what extent backbone organizations influence their constituents without formal authority. This series summarizes the findings from this effort, outlining in part one the sources of influence that enable backbone organizations to shape and guide the work of collective impact, and in part two the measures of influence that can help to demonstrate the backbone’s contributions to the collective impact effort.*

Sources and Measures of Influence in Collective Impact

A two-part series on how backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact without formal authority.

Exerting Influence Without Formal Authority

Measuring Backbone Contributions to Collective Impact

Much of the work of **collective impact** depends on the ability to change the attitudes and behaviors of a diverse array of stakeholders. After all, you need to build consensus to establish a common goal; you need all partners to agree on the same set of shared metrics to collectively

monitor progress; and you need collaboration and communication to identify mutually reinforcing activities that can help drive the work forward. The responsibility for affecting these changes in attitudes and behaviors often falls to the backbone organization, which has no formal authority over those it seeks to influence.

So, how do backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact when they operate in a collaborative system without “command and control” leadership? Through our research, we identified six sources of influence that enable them to guide constituents in their **community** without formal authority:

1. Competence

Backbone organizations with relevant content knowledge, and experience with strategic visioning and problem-solving, provide thought leadership, enabling them to influence others by explaining the benefits of a given course of action. Similarly, when backbone staff has strong interpersonal skills, they are more influential, as constituents trust that the organization can help them work together effectively. When we asked what unique value the backbone GCF backbone **Success by 6** provided, one person said: “[**Success by 6’s** backbone leader is] very good at managing relationships and making sure key people are kept in the loop and feel included. And she knows the work—she has credibility because she’s so knowledgeable about early childhood development.”

2. Commitment

Collective impact partners and broader community stakeholders often look to backbones as influential leaders because of their *track record* demonstrating dedication to the issue at hand. Also, those that demonstrate significant *ongoing effort* to the initiative inspire confidence in others that they are reliable and persistent. For example, one stakeholder explained that the **Vision 2015** backbone team members were “very clear about their role and priorities, and haven’t moved to the next shiny object. They haven’t lost focus.”

3. Objectivity

Backbones are most influential when community constituents view them as *honest brokers* with no personal stake in the collaboration’s ultimate course of action and no competitive dynamic with those involved. In these situations, constituents trust that the backbone is motivated by the common good and not personal gain. Further, backbones that are inclusive demonstrate that all viewpoints are welcome. They create safe spaces for difficult conversations and represent the needs of others; this enables them to exercise influence by appealing to shared values. One

individual we interviewed said: “**Partners for a Competitive Workforce** is an unbiased third party. They’re not in the trenches doing the work—they’re convening, they’re connecting the dots. It’s that neutral party that allows for common ground for all of us to get together and work together on an issue.”

4. Data and information

Quality *data and research* can help constituents understand the problem, promote accountability, learn, and improve. Meanwhile, *perspectives from community members* and those who stand to directly benefit from the work offer a valuable source of information. And *media channels* assist in disseminating information. Using these tools, the backbone can exert influence by providing data and proof. An example from our interviews: “[**The Strive Partnership**] has put data behind the work to show what these interventions can actually do. This helps to professionalize the work. They have built credibility around the work and made it something that people want to do.”

5. Network

Strong *connections to cross-sector players* and community members enable backbones to broker and mediate relationships between individuals and groups, while *endorsements from influential champions* enhance people’s trust that that backbone organizations will get the support they need to be successful. “**Agenda 360** is the connective tissue between the business community and all the other communities—for example, African American organizations, Hispanic organizations, the United Way, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation,” explained one stakeholder. “They are an umbrella for communities that don’t naturally find themselves together.”

6. Visibility

Backbones can be effective only when there is sufficient *awareness* among partners and community members about the initiative and the backbone’s contributions. Further, there must be *regard* for the backbone and recognition of its supportive role if the organization is to be effective and influential. One final example drawn from our interviews: “**LISC** is about as good as I’ve seen in terms of communicating success without sacrificing humility. They have a dedicated person assigned to communication who has helped to increase the

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation’s Cohort of Backbone Organizations

- **Agenda 360** advances regional economic competitiveness as a program of the Cincinnati USA Chamber of Commerce
- **LISC’s Place Matters** supports comprehensive community development in Greater Cincinnati neighborhoods with investment from a consortium of philanthropic funders and the national organization LISC

organization’s visibility exponentially and build its reputation in the community. Going down the road, this will be critical to the organization’s success.”

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and its cohort of backbone organizations (see right) have observed the importance of these six sources of influence that enable backbone organizations to carry out the work of shaping attitudes and behaviors so critical to advancing a collective impact initiative.

In part two of this series, we will discuss four measures of influence that demonstrate the backbone organization’s contributions to a collective impact initiative.

- **Partners for a Competitive Workforce** improves regional workforce development efforts, housed by United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- **The Strive Partnership** is a cradle to career initiative that focuses on improving outcomes for children and students in the urban core
- **Success by 6** focuses on improving early childhood education and kindergarten readiness, also housed by United Way
- **Vision 2015** supports economic competitiveness in Northern Kentucky and is closely aligned with Agenda 360 across the river



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