

Collaboration is the new mandate, and it is incumbent on all to understand collaboration's principles and practices.

5

Collaboration: Leveraging resources and expertise

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THE TERM COLLABORATION TOO often is used to describe any kind of cooperative activity between and among organizations. Such overuse of the term can serve to dilute the power of true collaboration, which has been defined as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.”¹ One can discern from this definition that collaboration is distinct from cooperation and coordination.

Having established a common understanding about collaboration, one can then look to the practices of collaboration. Primary to a discussion of collaboration practice is the question, Why do organizations collaborate? To answer this question fully, consider the perspectives of three classes of nonprofit organizational stakeholders: funding sources, clients, and potential partners.

Funding sources, faced with overwhelming social issues, want to ensure efficient and effective programs and organizations. The funder's mantra—avoid duplication of services—is well known to



nonprofit managers. In addition, funding sources have a bird's-eye view of the nonprofit community, which allows them to see patterns and potentials that the individual nonprofit may not see. There is even some basis for the idea that funding sources tend to like the concept of collaboration and partnerships, sometimes over and above the utility of these activities.

A series of focus groups in November and December 2004 in Denver that looked at the relationship between collaboration and nonprofit effectiveness comprised two groups of nonprofit managers and one group of funding sources. The funding sources' view of collaboration diverged from the majority view of the other focus groups, made up of nonprofit managers. The funding sources felt strongly that it was an ongoing responsibility of foundations and other funding sources to maintain an emphasis on collaboration as part of their funding criteria, and many funding sources require collaboration as part of funding packages. "We see the big picture and can see where partnerships and collaborations make sense," is what one participant in the funding sources' group stated. This view contrasts with that of participants in the other focus groups, who felt that the nonprofit manager, not the funder, knows whether a particular collaboration would be fruitful. The managers further stated that they do not believe that funding sources are always aware of the true costs of collaboration, particularly in increased staff time. Further, the nonprofit managers felt that a funding inducement to collaborate, unless thoughtfully applied, could lead to mission and goal displacement on the part of nonprofit organizations.

A second class of stakeholders, nonprofits' clients, is broad and can range from individuals receiving services to the members of the public who benefit from the work the nonprofit does for the community. Summer Scholars has a strong partnership with the Denver Parks and Recreation Department. Its value is evident in the following statement from a parent: "It means a lot to me that my children are able to come to school and get extended education after school. They also get to go on field trips, such as the Museum of Nature and Science, skiing, and swimming. This is very convenient for me, and when I get off work, I am able to take my kids directly home."

The third and most integral class of stakeholders whose perspective must be considered in the “why collaborate” discussion is an organization’s potential collaborative partners. These organizations, whether public, private, or fellow nonprofit organizations, are the key. Stated more precisely, it is the relationships based in aligning missions and pursuing mutually beneficial goals among these organizations that are key.

Summer Scholars is an excellent exemplar of collaboration principles and practices. Summer Scholars is a large, multisite extended learning program that relies on comprehensive collaboration to accomplish its mission of improving the literacy and social skills of youth in Denver. Founded in 1994, Summer Scholars has served over fifteen thousand elementary school-aged students and their families with summer, after-school, and family literacy academic and enrichment programs. Summer Scholars is a community-based nonprofit organization with two significant collaborating partners: Denver Public Schools and, as earlier stated, the City of Denver’s Parks and Recreation Department.

Today, Summer Scholars is an award-winning, year-round community literacy initiative partnering with twenty Denver Public Schools’ elementary schools to provide 1,950 at-risk youth each year with high-quality reading and writing instruction and enrichment in the out-of-school-time hours. Summer Scholars’ program components include summer literacy and recreation, school-year tutoring and enrichment, and year-round family literacy programs. All of Summer Scholars’ programs are housed at partner elementary schools for the students and families that attend the schools. The program staff includes many regular employees of the school district, and significant effort is made to align and complement school-day instruction in Summer Scholars extended learning programs. The collaboration between Summer Scholars and Denver Public Schools began on a school-by-school basis. At each individual site, Summer Scholars and partner schools share specific responsibilities. The schools are responsible for providing space, recruiting students, selecting staff, and providing information on

student needs. Summer Scholars is responsible for program administration, staff and student supervision, training, activities, and evaluation.

Summer Scholars and Parks and Recreation work together to provide recreation and enrichment to students in Summer Scholars' tutoring programs. The collaboration began with the summer program. Afternoon recreation provided by Parks and Recreation at each school site follows the morning academic instruction. Today, the collaboration also includes school-year after-school enrichment, with Summer Scholars' and Parks and Recreation's staff working side by side at schools to provide high-quality extended learning programs for Denver children. Summer Scholars and Parks and Recreation staff affectionately refer to their respective roles as the "academic geeks" and the "jocks," in reflection of each organization's role and expertise. Summer Scholars and Parks and Recreation jointly supervise each site, plan and implement staff training programs, and coordinate activities. Although each relationship is different, Summer Scholars' collaborations with Denver Public Schools and Parks and Recreation share many of the same successful components.

Components of successful collaboration

Shared priorities

Denver Public Schools' mission is to educate Denver's youth. A high-quality tutoring program like Summer Scholars is an important asset to the district in meeting its goals. The Denver Parks and Recreation mission includes providing recreation to Denver youth, and through Summer Scholars, Parks and Recreation has ready access to over seventeen hundred kids each year. Successful collaborations always have shared priorities.

Combined resources

Partners in collaboration invest both financial and human resources to ensure that collaboration will be successful. Without this invest-

ment, there will be a disparity of ownership that will lead to problems. Summer Scholars annually raises close to \$2 million to support its programs for Denver Public School students, so it makes good economic sense for the district to devote resources to the program. Denver Public Schools provides all the space for programs, transportation services, and funding for teacher training, at a value of approximately \$100,000 per year. Parks and Recreation brings close to \$500,000 each year to the table as well.

Institutional support and political will

Summer Scholars is fortunate to work closely and effectively with many individuals within the school district and city; however, effective collaboration also requires institutional support and the political will to develop this support. Summer Scholars is well recognized as a valuable community asset with the ability to influence policymakers, which has enabled the partnerships with the city and the school district to flourish and grow through several different mayors and superintendents.

Summer Scholars' founders, staff, and members of the board of directors are active and influential in the Denver community at large and are well known to the city council, mayor, and board of education. The relationship building that is essential to effective collaboration is ongoing at all levels.

Institutional support can and should be built through interpersonal relationships with key players who then have the potential to continue to reap rewards. Recently, one of the principals at a Summer Scholars partner school was promoted to another position within the district. The relationship with each school's principal is pivotal to the success of programs, so Summer Scholars made inquiries about the hiring process to request that the ability and willingness to work with community partners be a criterion for the selection of the next principal at this school. As it turns out, the point of contact was an area superintendent who was promoted and who also served as the lead principal for the summer program. Her knowledge, advocacy, and support of Summer Scholars are significant, so Summer Scholars is confident its concerns will be well addressed.

Shared clarity of expectations

Summer Scholars' partnership with Parks and Recreation is very hands on, with lots of joint planning sessions and meetings. The partnership with Denver Public Schools is much less interactive and focuses on well-established roles and responsibilities for each group. The day-to-day management of programs is jointly shared by Summer Scholars and Parks and Recreation, whereas Summer Scholars bears more responsibility than does Denver Public Schools in actual program implementation. Both styles work well, and the key to both is clarity of expectations. For example, an important role for the principal of each Denver Public Schools partner school is to ensure that the resources and priorities are available to recruit students for the programs. The principals understand that this is their most fundamental responsibility to the program. Once the students are recruited and their participation is under way, the principal has little responsibility in the program's implementation. By contrast, Parks and Recreation supervisors participate in weekly meetings with Summer Scholars site coordinators to problem solve and plan day-to-day operations.

Value added

The partnership of Parks and Recreation with Denver Public Schools adds significant value to services provided, and Summer Scholars adds value back to its partners. The ability to offer services in students' home school buildings provides a level of participation not otherwise likely. In addition, Summer Scholars provides high-quality teacher training that informs instruction on a daily basis throughout the city. Summer Scholars is able to offer recreation services to complement academics, and conversely, Parks and Recreation provides services with an academic component.

Organizational identity and branding

Successful collaborators are "partner friendly." At Summer Scholars, every grant application, brochure, and newsletter describes the collaborations used to implement services, and all of the successes and

awards are shared with partners. Collaboration is a part of Summer Scholars' organizational identity and brand identity. Recently the new superintendent of Denver Public Schools, Michael Bennett, rolled out a comprehensive plan for improving student achievement and the overall functioning of the district. Included in the plan was an objective to partner with community-based organizations for after-school and summer programs. Partnerships are part of the brand identity Bennett hopes to instill for the district.

Organizational effectiveness

Collaborations among organizations will be more successful if the parties are independently effective in accomplishing their objectives. At the same time, a successful collaboration can improve organizational effectiveness. The demands of collaboration include accountability, openness, risk-taking, comprehensive planning, willingness to confront and deal with conflict, creative and appropriate allocation of resources including staff time, and shared ownership. These are characteristics of effective management, and collaboration can help ramp up these skills in the partners. Recent research that looked at the relationship between collaboration and nonprofit organizational effectiveness among Denver human service organizations found a strong relationship. Collaborative activities were a strong component in influencing effectiveness, second only to an organization's change in management skills. Other influencing factors are board of directors' performance and management practices. One might assume that this assistance is balanced according to organizational size, but this is not necessarily the case. Summer Scholars is a relatively small community-based organization, particularly when compared with the size of Denver Public Schools. Even so, Denver Public Schools Superintendent Bennett had this to say: "Summer Scholars' approach to staffing, programs, best practices, and teacher professional development is a model for the entire school district, and their results reflect the quality of this outstanding program." Dolores Moreno at Denver Parks and Recreation made a similar comment when she said that her agency's relationship with Summer Scholars "provides great learning resources for . . . staff even as it provides them the opportunity to serve 'the whole child.'"

Common problems with collaboration

A lack of legitimate need is a common problem for many collaborations. Collaboration should be attempted only if there is a clear and present need that will be better met if organizations collaborate. Whereas many funding sources may require collaboration, a collaboration of convenience will only be window dressing and diminishes the value of true collaboration. Potential collaborating partners should consider how working together better serves the purpose of both organizations.

Sometimes incompatible organizational cultures make successful collaboration difficult to achieve. Incompatible refers to differences in processes, ownership, expectations, and quality of work. Summer Scholars began its collaboration with the school district one school at a time. At a school level, principals were motivated to help their students and willing to do the leg work necessary to help the program succeed. This bottom-up approach ensured that the initial stages of collaboration were between two groups with compatible organizational cultures. Had the effort been initiated with central administration, Summer Scholars' programs may have never been launched. Central Denver Public Schools administration would not have shared ownership with Summer Scholars' efforts in the same way individual schools did.

Not every collaborative effort undertaken by Summer Scholars has been successful. On these occasions, there has been a discrepancy in expectations, output, process, and quality of work.

Collaborations require significant investment of resources from all partners. Without mutual contribution of resources, shared ownership is difficult. The resources need not be equal but should represent an important financial commitment to the joint project.

An easy way to derail a collaboration is to disagree about who gets to call the shots or to overstep the bounds of authority. This can be prevented by clarifying expectations and roles at the outset and dealing with conflict quickly and openly. Parks and Recreation supervisors participate in Summer Scholars' weekly staff meetings for site

coordinators who supervise both Summer Scholars and Parks and Recreation staff. This helps facilitate communication and addresses most issues that otherwise might have created conflicts.

Steps to establishing or improving collaboration

Partners in collaboration need to clearly define and understand the need to be addressed by the collaboration, thus underscoring the legitimacy of the collaboration and each partner's interpretation of the problem the collaboration is addressing.

- Confirm shared priorities. Discuss each partner's mission and how the collaboration extends and complements both organizations' purposes.
- Clarify differences in approach. Identify differences in methods of service delivery and determine if the approaches can work together.
- Build institutional support for collaboration. Make sure the policy-makers and administrative and program staffs for both organizations are informed and supportive of the combined efforts.
- Build on existing strengths. Do not expect collaborating partners to provide a function in which they do not already have expertise. Instead, draw on and extend the strengths of both organizations to work together.
- Foster the development of champions. As with any effort, collaborations are well served by passionate, capable champions. Reinforce and appreciate the efforts made on behalf of the collaboration and constantly look to develop new champions.
- Address problems as they arise. Deal with conflict directly and apply the lessons learned to future efforts.
- Know when to call it quits. Not all collaborations will be successful. Continuing on in an unsuccessful partnership will take a toll on an organization's overall enthusiasm for collaboration. If a partnership is not working and cannot be fixed, call it quits.

In 2005, Summer Scholars was named the winner of the Excellence in Summer Learning award presented by the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University. This national recognition was reinforcement to many program components at which Summer Scholars excels, including academic instruction, evaluation, and program administration. In addition, the award validated how Summer Scholars' collaborations have leveraged the resources and expertise of different types of institutions to best meet the needs of a community's youth. Summer Scholars' efforts with Denver Public Schools and Denver Parks and Recreation Department exemplify smart practices in collaboration and demonstrate the power of organizations working together.

Note

1. Mattessich, P., & Monsey, B. (1993). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

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