

The **Research** Shop

COMMUNITY. CAMPUS. COLLABORATION. 

COLLABORATION: PRIORITIES & PROMISING PRACTICES

COLLABORATING FOR COMMUNITY
IMPACT RESEARCH REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2011

Tanya Darisi
Kim Chuong
Sonya Strohm
Jacqueline de Guzman

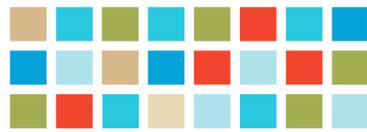
Citation: Darisi, T., Chuong, K., Strohm, S., & de Guzman, J.
Collaboration: Priorities & promising practices. Guelph, ON:
Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship.

<https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/8902>



INSTITUTE for COMMUNITY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

College of Social and Applied Human Sciences University of Guelph Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
phone: 519 / 824.4120 Ext. 53829 | email: ices@uoguelph.ca | www.theresearchshop.ca



The **Research** Shop

COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

INTRODUCTION

The non-profit sector is increasingly relying on collaboration as a strategy to be more efficient and effective in addressing complex social issues and in achieving common goals.

Recognition of this trend, and ongoing conversations about local collaboration, led to a partnership of 18 organizations in Guelph-Wellington and Waterloo Region. The partnership is represented in the Trillium-funded project, *Collaborating for Community Impact* (CCI) and is led by the Volunteer Centre of Guelph-Wellington and Trellis Mental Health and Development Services.

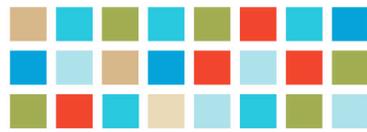
CCI aims to contribute towards healthier, more vibrant communities by increasing the impact of non-profit organizations through collaboration. To enable more effective and beneficial collaborations, CCI will build business plans based on promising practices for collaboration in the areas of:

- Leadership and governance,
- Back office and administrative functions, and
- Service delivery.

THE CURRENT PROJECT

The Research Shop (Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship, University of Guelph) was engaged to complete a research project that aimed to identify examples and promising practices in collaboration. To achieve this purpose, a literature review and key informant interviews were conducted. An online survey of collaboration needs and priorities among participating organizations was also completed. The research results will be used to inform the development of business plans and implementation strategies.

This report presents the highlights from the research findings, beginning with a definition of collaboration. Section 2 describes the facilitating factors and challenges of collaboration. Promising practices in collaboration are found in the supplementary tables. The last section describes identified priorities for collaboration.



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

Detailed research methods are presented in Appendix A. The complete literature review is presented in Appendix B. Examples of Collaboration as described by key informants I presented in Appendix C. Appendix D presents the detailed survey results.

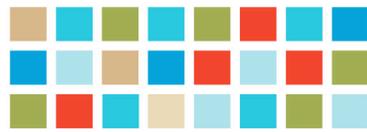
1. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COLLABORATION?

Collaboration is much discussed both in the literature and among service organizations. It has been likened to something “everyone talks about” and is defined by numerous authors, each with a various emphasis on the relational or directive aspects of collaboration (See Appendix A for a discussion of these definitions). In clarifying what we were talking about in our research, we started with a definition of collaboration drawn from the literature (Ahn, 2006; Mattessich, 2001; Guo & Acar, 2005). We then presented it to our key informant interview participants, and revised it based on their feedback.

For the most part, the working definition was seen to capture participants’ understanding and experiences of collaboration. It was refined by expanding the focus beyond social problems, to include opportunities. We also shifted the focus from collaboration between organizations to recognize that the collaborations of interest to the CCI initiative could happen between multiple groups of stakeholders, including communities, funders, non-profit and for-profit organizations. Thus, in the following report, we are using “collaboration” to mean:

“A mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more stakeholders to achieve common goals. It occurs when stakeholders work together to address problems and seize opportunities through shared effort, contribution of resources, decision-making, and ownership of the final products or outcomes.”

Key to this definition is that collaboration is a planned and systematic relationship, that is it is organized around the achievement of a clear goal, and that inputs, benefits and outcomes are shared between partners. This definition differentiates collaboration from informal or ad hoc processes of



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

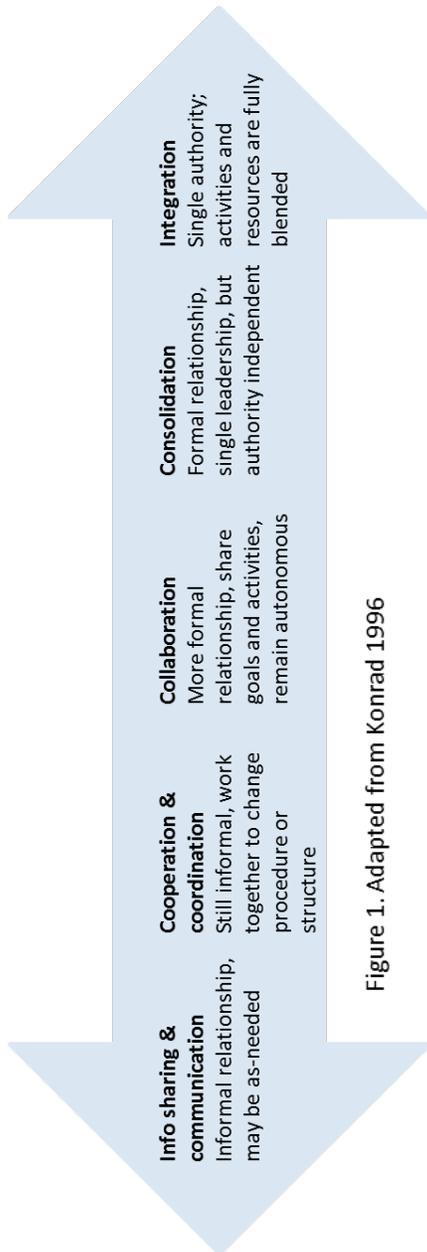


Figure 1. Adapted from Konrad 1996

working together, though such processes may evolve into collaborations. It also differentiates collaboration from processes where one organization makes the decisions and owns the initiative even though multiple stakeholders may contribute.

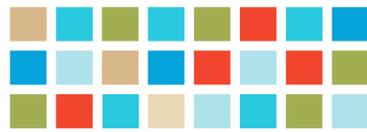
Collaborations occur at different levels of intensity, have a lifecycle, and are understood in terms of their duration and the extent to which partners are expected to be engaged and share resources. In models of service integration (Konrad, 1996; Ryan and Robinson, 2005), collaboration has been identified as a point on the continuum of engagement and sharing resources between organizations working together to achieve some goal. This continuum ranges from low engagement and sharing (e.g. awareness of each other or exchanging tools and resources) to high (e.g. consolidating services or fully merging organizations). Collaboration is positioned generally as a midpoint on this continuum, when processes and structures for working together have become more formalized and when partners are jointly invested but remain autonomous.

Figure 1 to the left shows a continuum of ways that service organizations may work together.

2. PROMISING PRACTICES

The supplementary tables to this report present examples of successful collaborations from both the literature and the key informant interviews. These tables provide a brief overview of the collaboration as well as insight into the factors that facilitated success.

In our review, we looked for examples of collaboration in each of the project domains – service delivery, back office and administration, and leadership and governance. We found a large number of examples related to collaboration in service delivery and in back office and administration. In the area of back office and administration, we found, for example, collaborations where organizations have worked together to share staff training, co-locate support functions and outsource human resources.



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

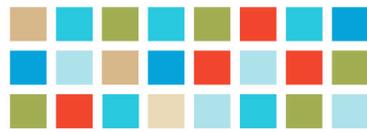
T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

It was more challenging to identify examples and models of collaboration in the leadership and governance domain. Organizational leadership was assumed to be part of any collaboration undertaken by an organization, though one report cautioned against collaborations becoming “executive director-centric” (Ahn, 2006). This caution was intended to emphasize that staff and other stakeholders play an important part in realizing the potential benefits of collaborative initiatives. With regards to governance, we found models for collaboration within boards of directors (Carver model) as well as a collaborative governance model for multi-stakeholder initiatives (Constellation model).

The literature consistently demonstrated that a collaborative approach can result in tangible benefits to stakeholders, including increased capacity, efficiency and effectiveness. At the same time, the literature made clear that in order to realize intended benefits and outcomes, collaborations require significant investment in terms of time, planning, funding, and technical assistance (e.g. facilitation, IT, evaluation, etc.). As well, collaborative processes present a number of challenges, particularly around the management of relationships and trust between stakeholders. These findings, including the facilitating factors, the challenges and the benefits, were reiterated in the key informant interviews.

Overall key informants spoke of both the benefits and challenges associated with collaboration, with a predominant focus on the relational aspects. Successful collaborations were associated with strong, trusting relationships, mutual contribution, and shared vision and goals. Challenges were seen to arise when relationships were undermined by issues related to trust, ownership and understanding of the process and goals of the collaboration.

Factors that support collaboration. Local collaborations were often described as unfolding in an inductive, organic process, though key informants noted the importance of planning and doing the right background work (e.g. needs assessment; environmental scan). They also noted the



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

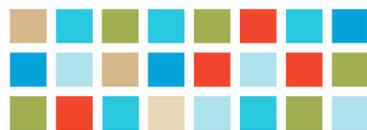
T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

importance of leadership in getting a collaboration going and in seeing it through. When asked what supported the success of the collaborations presented above, key informants focused on activities that supported building and maintaining strong relationships.

Collaboration was seen to be facilitated by:

- Building respectful and trusting relationships with partners, which involved transparency and clearly defined expectations, open communication and demonstration of commitment. Strong relationships were also supported by partners' abilities to be flexible, open-minded and willing to negotiate.
- Committing resources, including time, staff, expertise, and funding: "to get more capacity, you have to invest the capacity to make it work." Key informants emphasized that the commitment and sharing of resources had to be mutual and equitable between partners in order for collaboration to work.
- Taking time to plan. Key informants emphasized that planning is crucial to success in collaboration, including clearly identifying needs, clarifying roles and ways of working together, and realistically assessing what resources are available and what resources are needed.
- Having a clear timeline, meeting on a regular basis and having regular check-ins. These activities were seen to help the collaboration stay on track.

Factors that hinder collaboration. Again, key informants focused on relationships when discussing barriers or challenges to collaboration. Relationships were seen to be vulnerable if there was inequitable distribution of costs, resources and decision-making powers between partners. As well, there was a perceived need to manage expectations about the monetary, time, and human resources investments required. There was the strong belief that collaboration would be more efficient and cost-effective than individual effort;



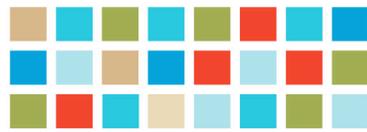
COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

however, some key informants noted the high level of investment—from both individuals and organizations—required in order to achieve goals.

Factors that were said to hinder collaboration included:

- Challenges in establishing mutual trust and ownership of processes and projects – getting caught up in “Who gets funding?” “Who gets credit?” “Who has to do extra work?” Trust was undermined when key informants perceived a lack of follow up, competition and politics between organizations, when there is sensitivity around “stepping on toes” or one partner “taking over”.
- Different understandings of what collaboration is and how it happens. Some key informants mentioned challenges arose when partners saw collaboration as “networking”, or as a minimal commitment. They also emphasized the need for partners to understand the costs (time, funding) associated with collaboration.
- Different understanding of the goals and directions for a collaborative project. Key informants noted that when partners did not agree on the goals or directions, decision making became a challenge and the project could be held up.
- Finding and managing time. Time was a main challenge identified by key informants, including the finding the time to commit to a collaborative effort, as well as knowing how to pace the initiative and getting caught in slow-moving conversations. Some key informants noted that the demands on staff and senior administration are already overwhelming – especially for smaller organizations – as their time is focused on delivering services, or just “keeping the lights on”.
- Staff resistance to the collaboration and new ways of doing things. Staff turnover during the initiative.



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

- Navigating the larger systems, including timing, legislation, funding, while balancing organizational needs.

Despite these challenges, key informants consistently noted that successful collaborations resulted in benefits for their organizations as well as for their clients. Organizations were believed to have gained efficiency and effectiveness. Some key informants believed collaborations that improved services raised their profile in the community and demonstrated their responsiveness to client and community needs.

4. COLLABORATION PRIORITIES

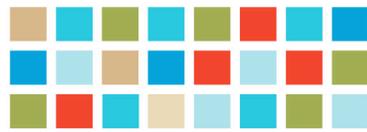
Both key informants and survey participants identified opportunities for collaboration in back office and administrative functions and in leadership and governance. Though they spoke primarily of service delivery collaborations, few key informants identified service delivery when asked about opportunities for collaboration.

The following highlights the priorities identified by survey participants (See Appendix C for the detailed results of the survey).

Leadership and Governance. Challenges in leadership and governance were very much related to the recruitment, retention, training and education of skilled committed board members. Survey participants also identified challenges related to maintaining role clarity for the board, between governance and operations issues, and to succession planning. Identified priorities in leadership and governance were:

- Sharing board education & training opportunities (86%)
- Web-based governance information & networking (82%)
- Sharing strategic planning with other organizations (77%)

Back Office and Administration. Challenges in back office and administration functions were related to staff training and to information technology systems. All survey participants identified IT



COLLABORATION PRIORITIES AND PROMISING PRACTICES

T. Darisi, K. Chuong, S. Strohm,
J. de Guzman
September 2011

needs, including IT management and technical support, as well as the need for shared data systems. Identified priorities in back office and administration were:

- Sharing technology strategy and information systems (100%)
- Sharing employee training (89%)
- Sharing health and safety training (78%)
- Sharing space (78%)

Service Delivery. When asked about challenges and opportunities for collaboration in service delivery, the majority of survey participants focused on building the capacity of their staff and organizations. The need to reduce waitlists was a priority as was the need to expand services throughout the region. A few participants also mentioned the need for better access to primary health care and to specialists, including psychiatrists and physicians.

4. SUMMARY

Our research confirms much of the experience and expertise of the organizations and individuals involved in Collaborating for Community Impact. As collaborations have been shown to increase capacity for meeting community and client needs, as well as supporting organizational functions, moving forward on the priorities and opportunities should bring benefits to the organizations involved. In moving forward with collaboration, the need for clear understanding about purpose and roles, for strong leadership, and for planning are all key in achieving success.