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# Collective Impact Strategies: Introduction to the Special Issue

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## **Collective Impact Strategies: Introduction to the Special Issue**

Joseph A. Allen, Sheridan Trent, and Kelly A. Prange

The societal and cultural issues facing humanity are far greater than any nonprofit, for-profit, university, or government agency to address adequately alone. Whether poverty, water shortages, socio-economic inequality, natural disasters with lasting effects, or any number of other challenges facing our communities, organizations must band together to secure the impact needed to truly create change. Increasingly, communities are turning to collective impact as an approach that brings together the collective resources of multiple institutions to address a community-identified problem or need. While a somewhat new approach, there is a growing body of evidence of supporting the effectiveness of using the collective impact approach to addressing wicked problems (Bridgeland et al., 2012; Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014).

As anchor institutions, Metropolitan Universities have a unique opportunity and responsibility to initiate and promote social change in a way that also advances their mission. Unlike other institutions for higher education, Metropolitan Universities are most suited for targeting social change because of the type of communities they serve and their location within large municipalities. Participating in collective impact is increasingly seen as one approach to this. This issue includes case studies and practical papers to prepare Metropolitan University administrators, faculty, and staff to initiate, facilitate, and strengthen collective impact initiatives in their communities.

### **What is Collective Impact?**

Collective impact initiatives address a social issue by bringing together multiple stakeholders to achieve a common goal (Kania & Kramer, 2015). Traditionally, organizations targeting the same problem work independently from each other. This frequently results in competition for funding and resources, duplication of effort, and, at times, critical issues left unaddressed (Kania & Kramer, 2011). A collective impact approach seeks to align the goals, priorities, strategies and resources of the separate organizations in order to drive change simultaneously.

The characteristics of collective impact were first described by Kania and Kramer in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2011. Although the term collective impact is used to describe many multi-organization partnerships, the following are essential criteria to be considered a true collective impact initiative (Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014).

- A Common Agenda among the stakeholders is critical to both addressing the larger wicked problem.
- Shared Measurement Systems enable the stakeholders to track and assess the impact of their efforts on the shared goal.
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities are efforts that interact in a meaningful way to create something greater than in the individual actions.

- Continuous Communication refers to the steady flow of information within and across partners in the initiative along pre-defined channels via preferred communication methods.
- Backbone Support Organization is the hallmark of effective collective impact initiatives. Typically, one of the organizations in the collective impact initiative, the backbone support organization often provides a facilitator, project manager, data manager, as well as provide administrative support activities for the collective, such as grant applications, marketing, meeting planning, and communications.

## **Articles in this Volume**

The articles in this volume represent many of the thought leaders on collective impact as well as how collective impact initiatives unfold across domains, problem types, and even countries. The issue begins with an overview of collective impact and the role of urban and metropolitan universities. Smith, Pelco, and Rooke from Virginia Commonwealth University describe three paradigms of university-community partnerships (e.g., community engagement, anchor institutions, and collective impact). Using these frameworks, they describe a case study of the Bridging Richmond Partnership, highlighting the role of a university in supporting higher education in the local community by supporting local students and program promoting youth seeking education. Drawing on a series of interviews, Raderstrong and Nazaire from Living Cities outline effective strategies and processes for using data at each stage of a collective impact effort to guide and assess impact.

The next two articles highlight the role of student development in collective impact efforts. Jones, Croft, and Longacre from the University of Houston discuss the collective impact and ecosystemic approach to address student attrition at the University of Houston. Similarly, Trent, Prange, and Allen, from the Industrial/Organizational Psychology program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, describe the efforts of a university organization to achieve collective impact in order to maximize the effectiveness of the organization's mission. Specifically, students in the Industrial/Organizational Psychology program provide free volunteer program assessments to local nonprofit organizations under the direction of faculty from the university. Ways in which the program resembles a collective impact effort, as well as the ways in which it differs, are discussed. They hope to demonstrate that even when efforts are not collective impact in their entirety, great impact can still be achieved.

Two of the articles highlight how collective impact efforts have the potential to target business and economic challenges. Szarleta, from Indiana University Northwest, discusses a collective impact initiative to utilize social entrepreneurship to address wicked problems, with a university taking the role of a backbone support organization. Lessons learned from the initiative so far are disseminated, as well as highlighting a research agenda for future collective impact efforts with universities acting as backbone support organizations. Similarly, De Chiara from the University of Naples "L'Orientale", Italy, explores collective impact as a potential solution for environmental problems that result from the competitiveness of the economy (i.e. challenges of starting and supporting local businesses). The failures of two collaborative efforts involving environmental issues in industrial districts which utilized traditional networks, including the

environmental crisis of the ‘The Land of Fires,’ and the tannery district of Solafra, are presented as case studies.

Finally, the issue concludes with two articles that highlight that collective impact efforts can and perhaps should be used for problems that are indeed unique to a given location and community. First, Gwynne, director of the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, discusses the application of collective impact to the wicked problem (i.e., problems which are considered nearly impossible to address) of providing Aboriginal people in Australia with adequate healthcare. Three prominent health issues, including stroke prevention, improved access to allied health, and improved oral health care, are outlined, as well as the collective impact efforts made so far to address these problems and enable a higher level of collaboration community control. Second, Tooker, from Wagner College, documents the use of collective impact to address heroin and opiate addiction on Staten Island. Using a collective impact approach, a partnership between Wagner College and community organizations is being leveraged to reduce the instance of youth substance abuse in the surrounding area.

## **Conclusion**

Across these articles a lessons learned emerged in terms of collective impact efforts. These include the following:

- Collective impact efforts are adaptable to many different problems;
- Collective impact efforts serve both communities and institutions of higher education;
- Collective impact is useful across cultures for targeting issues of social change and need;
- Collective impact, as a framework, is not necessarily the best way to address community problems.

We believe our readers will find the articles in this special thought-provoking and meaningful. Further, we anticipate our readers will identify other unique and thematically oriented takeaways beyond those listed here. Hopefully the information provided here will equip and spur others to enact change in their communities.

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