



Rethinking Common Backbone Functions as Capacities

This resource is one item in a suite of materials produced for the P-16 Community Investment initiative, a three-year learning engagement funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation across five communities (Buffalo, New York; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; the Rio Grande Valley, Texas; and Tacoma, Washington). The initiative seeks to understand and support the development of coherent, high-functioning, equity-centered, place-based systems that span all education sectors from cradle to career. Funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders interested in place-based systems change can use this resource in their work. It was developed by a team from Mathematica and Equal Measure, in collaboration with the foundation and its partners in the participating communities. Mathematica and Equal Measure serve as learning and evaluation partners in this effort.

Key terms used in this resource



Community: the place that is the locus of a systems change effort and the population in that place, which a collective effort or initiative is seeking to serve



Partnership: a place-based, multi-stakeholder effort or initiative working to improve outcomes in a community



Partner: an individual, organization, or institution that is a member of a partnership



Backbone organization: a coordinating body that facilitates and organizes the work of partners




As we approach the 10-year anniversary of Kania and Kramer’s [foundational article](#) identifying the five conditions of collective impact, organizations can rethink [common backbone functions](#) needed to support collective initiatives. It is worth considering which capacities of backbone organizations could be distributed across partner organizations to improve the partnership’s chances of long-term success.


In recent years, and even more amid the current COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice movements, and economic hardships, the philanthropic and nonprofit sector is focused on shifting [systems](#), [mental models](#), and [power structures](#) to become more localized for communities to accomplish collective goals. Backbone organizations and partners are well-positioned to assess and respond to community needs,

but shifting systems requires repurposing certain functions from the backbone and devolving some of them to partners for stronger community ownership.

To determine which functions are most suited to backbones and which might be taken up by partners, it is helpful to consider the capacities required to carry out typical backbone functions. **Through a review of extant literature, we grouped backbone functions into four categories and identified some of the key capacities necessary for each.** In each category, we delineate the capacities necessary to perform these functions effectively to achieve collective goals throughout the community. We also identify the potential stakeholders who demonstrate these capacities (Table 1).

Table 1. Four categories of backbone functions, each with capacity examples and potential stakeholders¹

Function	Capacities	Potential stakeholders
 <p>Manage relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to others and understand their perspectives, motivations, and expertise • Build trust • Develop strong ties • Craft resonant narratives • Resolve conflict • Cultivate champions 	Backbone organization
 <p>Manage knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hear and understand the needs of the community spanning pre-K to K, K-12 to postsecondary, and postsecondary to workforce • Identify and share promising practices • Solicit solutions from the community • Curate, navigate, and filter information that is external to the community 	Community-based organization, research institution, or local journalism/media nonprofit
 <p>Hold partners accountable to a shared agenda</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a regional vision in collaboration with others • Build public will • Set up and manage accountability frameworks 	Steering committee*
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpret data and communicate results (e.g., to promote transparency and to address inequities across sub-groups) • Use data for continuous improvement and to drive strategy 	Think tank, research institution, or K-12 school district
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance policy 	Policy/advocacy liaison

<p>Orchestrate collective efforts</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene partners and bridge divisions • Facilitate discussion and structure group engagement • Coordinate with partners and support mutually reinforcing activities • Design and manage work plans • Pilot test and provide direct services • Manage expectations 	<p>Backbone organization</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilize resources 	<p>Local foundations</p>

* As direct service providers, child care, preschool, K-12 school districts, higher education institutions, and employer representatives should serve on the steering committee to advance the common vision and hold one another accountable to outcomes.

Backbones should continue to [manage relationships and orchestrate collective efforts among partners](#), but could identify other stakeholders to manage knowledge and data and enforce accountability measures. Historically, backbones often emerged in the wake of [cross-sector collaboration](#) among civic leaders rather than emerging to initiate a collaboration. The sector’s renewed focus on shifting systems has prompted a return to models influenced by community change initiatives, propelled by the [Aspen Institute](#) and the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) in the 1990s. These initiatives harnessed the collective work among partners, rather than centering the work within a single organization. Decentralizing functions, akin to that seen in [intermediary](#) and [community quarterback](#) models, can lead to more dispersed and grounded approaches toward achieving the collective aims and common agenda.

Repurposing functions reinforces that backbones can share the load. Community stakeholders should assess regularly which functions a backbone should meet and those partners should meet. Over time, we have seen backbone organizations coordinate the work of partners, not necessarily fulfill it. When backbones have small staffs, limited funding, and overstretched responsibilities, sharing backbone capacities may strengthen key aspects such as [community ownership](#), [self-determination](#), [accountability](#), and [sustainability](#).

Through this lens, backbones should still exhibit several high-level qualities, such as:

- **Supporting** the fidelity of the common agenda and rules for interaction among cross-sector players
- **Defining** the parameters of the collective initiative
- **Building** trusting relationships with community partners to establish credibility and authority in leading mutually reinforcing activities around a shared agenda
- **Celebrating** partners’ successes and accomplishments, lifting each other’s progress
- **Serving** as entry points for external funders and being a voice for the community
- **Educating** on the history and context of root causes of racial, social, and economic inequities
- **Transforming** systems, relationships, and intentions to act

Backbones have ample room to adapt capacities to remain inclusive of the local community and stay committed to the complex collaborations among partners. Preparing for the next 10 years of collective action prompts new conversation and discussion on how best backbones position themselves.

Acknowledgements

The Mathematica–Equal Measure team extends heartfelt thanks to the many individuals who contributed to the development of this suite of materials on place-based systems change. In particular, we are indebted to the P-16 Community Investment grantees and partners acting under the backbone leadership of Say Yes Buffalo (Buffalo, New York), the Public Education Foundation (Chattanooga, Tennessee), the Commit Partnership (Dallas, Texas), RGV FOCUS (Rio Grande Valley, Texas), and the Foundation for Tacoma Students (Tacoma, Washington). Backbone staff and partners in these communities generously shared their experiences and perspectives and are at the center of this work. At the Gates Foundation, we thank the P-16 Community Investment team—especially Fannie Tseng, Jean-Claude Brizard, Jill Hawley, Lindsay Hunsicker, Lu Jiang, and Christine Marson—for their support, guidance, and encouragement. At Education First, we thank Kelly Kovacic Duran, Bill Porter, Claire Takhar, and Anand Vaishnav, who provided ideas for and feedback on development and dissemination. At Mathematica, we recognize Ann Person and Kristin Hallgren for their thought leadership and guidance in the development of this resource; Liah Carvalho, who co-led our dissemination strategy; Jennifer Brown, for editorial support; Sarah Vienneau, for graphic design support; and Sharon Clark, who led production. At Equal Measure, we recognize Meg Long for her thought leadership and guidance, and Seth Klukoff, who co-led the dissemination strategy.

Contact us:

To learn more or get in touch with the author of this resource, email

[Matthew Closter, Ph.D](mailto:Matthew.Closter@mathematica.org)

Works Cited

FSG & Aspen Institute for Community Solutions (2017). Backbone Starter Guide: [A Summary of Major Resources about the Backbone from FSG and the Collective Impact Forum](#).

[Harder+Co. & Equal Measure](#) (2017). Cultivating Systems Leadership in Cross-Sector Partnerships: Lessons from the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence.

Rodrigues, M. & Fisher, S. (2017). [Collective Impact: A Literature Review. Community Works](#).

Endnotes

¹ The functions and capacities are compiled from various sources of literature on collective impact and backbone functions, especially Harder+Co and Equal Measure (2017), Rodrigues and Fisher (2017), and FSG and the Collective Impact Forum (2017).

FIND & FOLLOW US

Mathematica.org

P.O. Box 2393 Princeton, NJ 08543-2393



Equalmeasure.org

520 Walnut St., Suite 1450 Philadelphia, PA 19106

