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# Building and Sustaining Partnerships to Advance a Postsecondary Systems Change Agenda

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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OMG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING



## About the OMG Center

Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning (OMG) provides evaluation and philanthropic services to social sector organizations. Our areas of focus include “cradle-to-career” education, asset development, community health, diversity leadership, and arts and culture, among other fields. For 30 years, our clients have been major private and community foundations, government organizations, and national and regional nonprofits. Within the field of postsecondary access and success, OMG has worked on an array of major national and regional initiatives for organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, the Citi Foundation, the Strive Network, Achieving the Dream, Campus Compact, and the California Career Advancement Academies.

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## Acknowledgements

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Amarillo, TX	Jacksonville, FL	Phoenix, AZ
Boston, MA	Louisville, KY	Portland, OR
Brownsville, TX	Mesa, AZ	Raleigh, NC
Charlotte, NC	New York, NY	Riverside, CA
Dayton, OH	Philadelphia, PA	San Francisco, CA

The individuals and organizations that forged partnerships in each of these communities are singularly committed to establishing a legacy of college success, and we celebrate them for those efforts. We are also grateful for their contributions as thought partners, and their insights have helped the OMG Center shape and refine what we learned over the course of the initiative.

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## Introduction

Nationally, 52% of 2011 U.S. high school graduates and GED earners from low-income families enrolled immediately in a two- or four-year college, compared to 82% and 66% of their high- and middle-income counterparts, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, the Condition of Education, 2013). Once they enroll in college, low-income youth face a number of academic and non-academic obstacles, making it more difficult to succeed. Given the increasing demand for a workforce with postsecondary credentials and the rising costs of a college education, low-income youth in the U.S. are faced with significant challenges in their pursuit of living wage employment. Postsecondary completion continues to evolve as a hot bed issue nationally, at the state level, and in individual communities.

As philanthropies and nonprofits have acknowledged the scope of these challenges, so too have they recognized that simply creating new programs, while important, will not solve the problem. Larger system and structural barriers need to be addressed if more students are going to earn postsecondary credentials and degrees.

Philanthropies and social investors are recognizing that “place matters,” and see the potential of place-based strategies for catalyzing system changes. Local communities offer a scale at which cross-sector, systemic challenges can be addressed, and provide opportunities to affect significant numbers of students. In fact, at the time of writing this Issue Brief, we can account for more than 20 national initiatives supported by federal government and national philanthropies that focus on “place-based” strategies.

This Issue Brief presents lessons from our three-year evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships portfolio and illustrates how communities can implement multi-sector strategies to shift local systems and improve student postsecondary completion.

### OMG’S EVALUATION

The goal of our developmental evaluation was to gain a clearer picture of how communities build partnerships; engage stakeholders; use data; and create, align, and shift policies and practices to increase postsecondary success. Our methodology did not entail judging the effectiveness of communities’ approaches against a predetermined set of measures.

### About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Community Partnerships Portfolio

With a 2025 goal of doubling the number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree or credential with genuine value in the workplace by age 26, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested more than 20 million dollars in the Community Partnerships portfolio. The objective was to understand what it takes for cross-sector partnerships to advance a community-wide postsecondary completion agenda that instigates system-level changes (described in the following section) and ultimately improves postsecondary completion outcomes for students.

From 2009-2013, seven communities received Community Partnerships funding through two sister initiatives — Communities Learning in Partnership (CLIP) and Partners for Postsecondary Success (PPS) — to develop and implement a multi-sector strategy that included community and four-year colleges, K-12 school districts, municipal leaders, local businesses, community-based organizations, parents and students, and others. CLIP sites received funding for three years and nine months and PPS sites received funding for two years and four months. Communities also received support from an intermediary partner who provided technical assistance and coaching support throughout the grant period: the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families worked with CLIP cities and MDC Inc. worked with PPS cities. An additional eight communities were involved in the portfolio as affiliate cities, participating in regular convenings, phone calls, and webinars with the seven implementation sites.

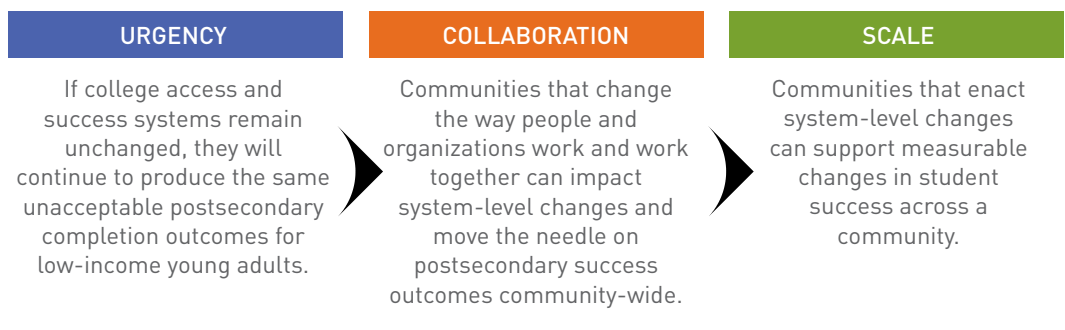
**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS PORTFOLIO COMMUNITIES**

<p><b>CLIP</b>  Mesa, AZ  New York, NY  Riverside, CA  San Francisco, CA</p>	<p><b>CLIP Affiliate Sites</b>  Boston, MA  Dayton, OH  Jacksonville, FL  Louisville, KY  Philadelphia, PA  Phoenix, AZ  Portland, OR</p>	<p><b>PPS</b>  Amarillo, TX  Brownsville, TX  Raleigh, NC</p> <p><b>PPS Affiliate Site</b>  Charlotte, NC</p>
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## About the Community Partnerships Theory of Change

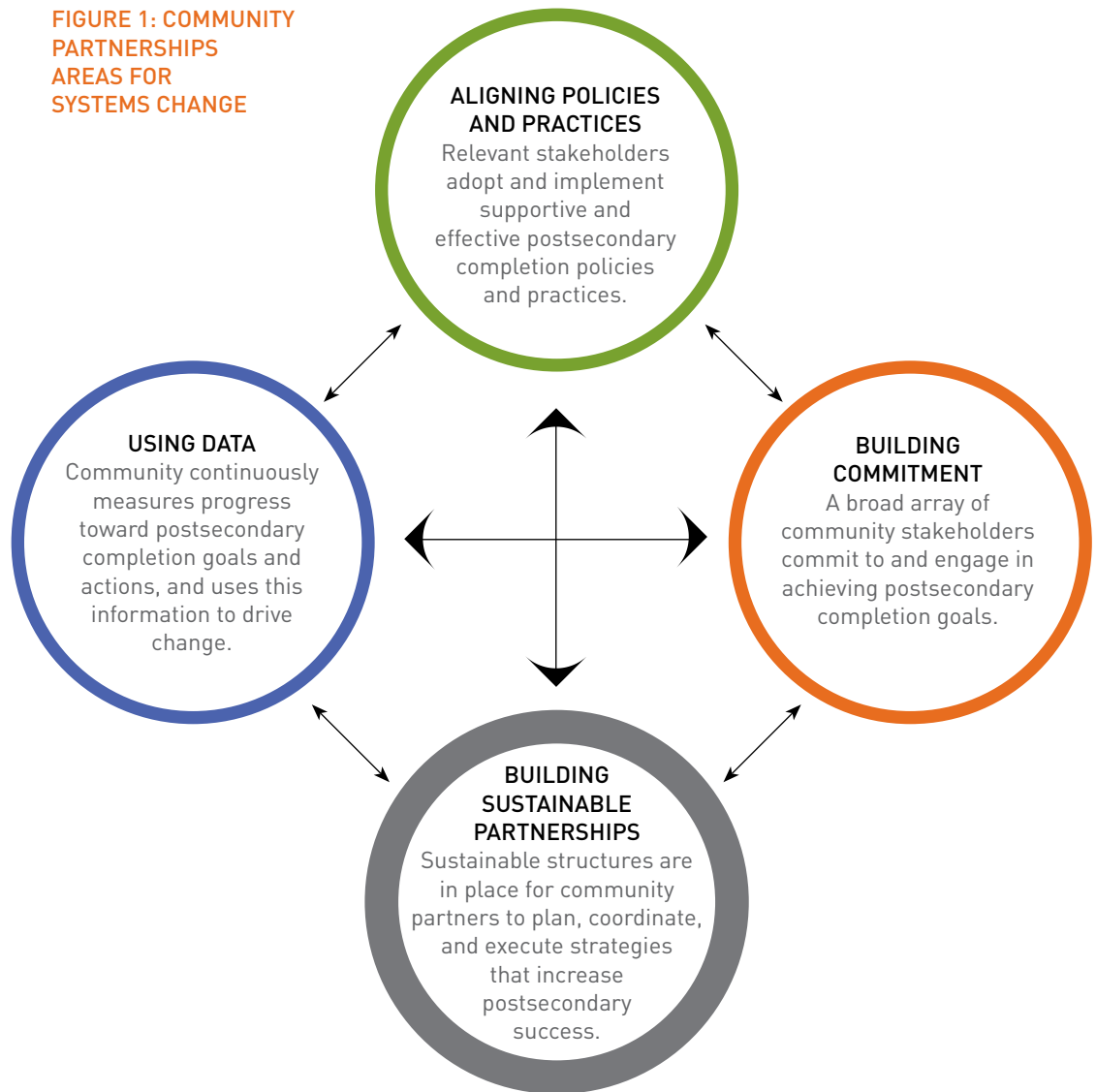
The Community Partnerships sites used a loosely defined Theory of Change (TOC) to help communities set parameters to plan and implement their respective postsecondary success strategies.

Three basic premises drove the Community Partnerships investment:



The TOC stipulated that cross-sector partnerships would use data and leverage key stakeholder commitment to align policies and practices to promote postsecondary success. In other words, evidence of systems change would emerge across four mutually reinforcing areas, illustrated in Figure 1. If we saw evidence of change across these four areas, then we would know that the “system” had in fact shifted.

**FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AREAS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**



This Issue Brief focuses on the area of **BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS** and addresses two questions:

**1. WHY** is building and sustaining a partnership important for place-based investments? and **2. HOW** can communities successfully build and sustain partnerships that advance a postsecondary systems change agenda?

## Why is Building and Sustaining a Partnership Important for Place-Based Investments?

The development of cross-sector partnerships is a distinguishing feature of this investment. Cross-sector partnerships — consisting of K-12 school districts, higher education institutions, employers, local philanthropy, and community- and faith-based organizations, among others — strengthen the community's focus on postsecondary success, and serve as the vehicle through which the postsecondary success agenda is carried out. The establishment of partnership structures allowed a variety of sectors to organize around a common vision, and created space for partners to develop joint strategies for carrying out that vision. Furthermore, partnerships enabled organizations to align policies and practices, and create a *system-wide* approach to improving postsecondary success.

Over time, partnerships developed processes to refine strategies, made joint decisions about how to implement those strategies, operationalized plans to influence change within and across partner institutions, and contributed their own financial and in-kind resources to sustain the postsecondary success agenda.

The partnerships served four primary purposes:

- 1. To inform a community-wide agenda:** Partnerships brought a variety of perspectives and expertise to develop and implement a systems change strategy.
- 2. To provide political backing and peer support to take action:** Partnerships provided public and political cover to support partners when they needed to make tough decisions or implement difficult changes.
- 3. To implement actions aligned with a community-wide agenda:** Partnerships ensured that the implementation of individual partner policies and practices played out in a cohesive, aligned, and systemic fashion.
- 4. To maintain momentum, attention, and commitment to the postsecondary success agenda:** Partnerships included a diverse set of stakeholders as ongoing champions of the agenda, in particular, weathering changing community contexts.

While partnership structures varied in each community, those that were most successful shared many characteristics. They engaged a diverse base of partners, developed and managed strong relationships across partners, and created structures that effectively tapped into the collective wisdom, knowledge, and action of the group. Establishing partnerships ensured that the agenda — by virtue of its connection to and penetration within an array of organizations — would continue through shifting political, social, and economic contexts.

## How Can Communities Successfully Build and Sustain Partnerships that Advance a Postsecondary Systems Change Agenda?

Of the lessons learned from the Community Partnerships evaluation, four have important ramifications for building and sustaining partnerships:

- **Create a partnership that reflects community breadth and organizational depth**
- **Tailor the roles and responsibilities of the lead organization to its strengths; rely on partners to provide missing capacities**
- **Structure a team for strategy, operations, and action**
- **Leverage community capacity, but know when to engage someone from the outside**

**Create a partnership that reflects community breadth and organizational depth: Sites with the most promise for sustaining their work engaged representatives from organizations across the community, as well as individuals at multiple levels within those organizations. In doing so, these sites created an agenda that addressed a wide range of community needs, built on diverse skills and capacities, and embedded activities within each partner organization.**

The most diverse partnerships included representatives from: (1) an array of organizations and sectors, and (2) individuals representing a variety of roles and responsibilities within the same organization. While many communities engaged educational institutions first, partners from complementary fields — workforce development, economic development, community health, and the private sector — also became important. Additionally, sites depended on partners from a variety of organizational levels — from the most senior leaders to front-line employees.



The more diverse the partnership, the greater the likelihood of establishing a true community-wide focus that broke down silos. Partnership diversity also ensured that the appropriate individuals were in place to set *and* implement its vision. Partnerships composed solely of “senior leadership” were not enough. While these leaders championed the work and generated buy-in with other leaders, middle managers and front-line staff translated the agenda into policy and practice changes within their organizations and ensured that high-level strategy was grounded in reality. As part of the Raleigh Fellows Program, for example, staff serving as liaisons on each of the six Raleigh-area campuses connected students to a variety of campus-based resources. Liaisons’ involvement served two critical functions: 1) they carried out the partnership’s strategy to improve students’ postsecondary outcomes, and 2) they provided critical perspectives regarding students’ day-to-day experiences that helped the partnership refine its strategy to best meet students’ needs.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the types of organizations (breadth) and roles (depth) represented among communities’ partnerships.

**FIGURE 2: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS – BREADTH AND DEPTH**

BREADTH OF ORGANIZATIONS/INSTITUTIONS	DEPTH OF INSTITUTIONAL ROLES
<p><b>Elected and Civic Officials:</b> Municipal offices (Mayors and City Managers), City Council</p> <p><b>Postsecondary Partners:</b> Community colleges, four-year colleges, technical colleges</p> <p><b>K-12 School District Partners:</b> School Districts (public and vocational), School Boards</p> <p><b>Community Organizations:</b> Local affiliates of national organizations (e.g., United Way), community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, local research organizations</p> <p><b>Students and Parents:</b> Parent organizations, K-12 student organizations, college student organizations</p> <p><b>Business Partners:</b> Local businesses, Chambers of Commerce, Economic and Workforce Development Boards/Offices</p>	<p><b>Executive Leaders:</b> Mayors, City Managers, Deputy Mayors; District Superintendents, District Assistant Superintendents; Community College Presidents, Vice Presidents, Provosts; and Executives from local business, nonprofits, other agencies</p> <p><b>Mid-Level Decision-Makers:</b> City Directors, School District Directors, College Deans, Nonprofit Program Directors, Agency Directors</p> <p><b>Front-Line Connectors:</b> Teachers, Principals, college faculty members, college student services staff, Guidance Counselors, School District and nonprofit parent liaisons, nonprofit college advisors, clergy</p>

## Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Conduct a community-wide scan of partners engaged in postsecondary success work
- ✓ Perform a secondary scan of likely allies and partners, who, even peripherally, may be influenced by the community's postsecondary success — particularly those addressing workforce and economic development issues
- ✓ Communicate the importance of diverse perspectives and roles to partners; develop a clear understanding of how different partners can add value to the partnership.
- ✓ Include students and parents in a partnership's actions and decision-making processes — these stakeholders often are overlooked
- ✓ Align roles and responsibilities with partners' diverse perspectives and skills
- ✓ Engage others within their institutions in the project's work

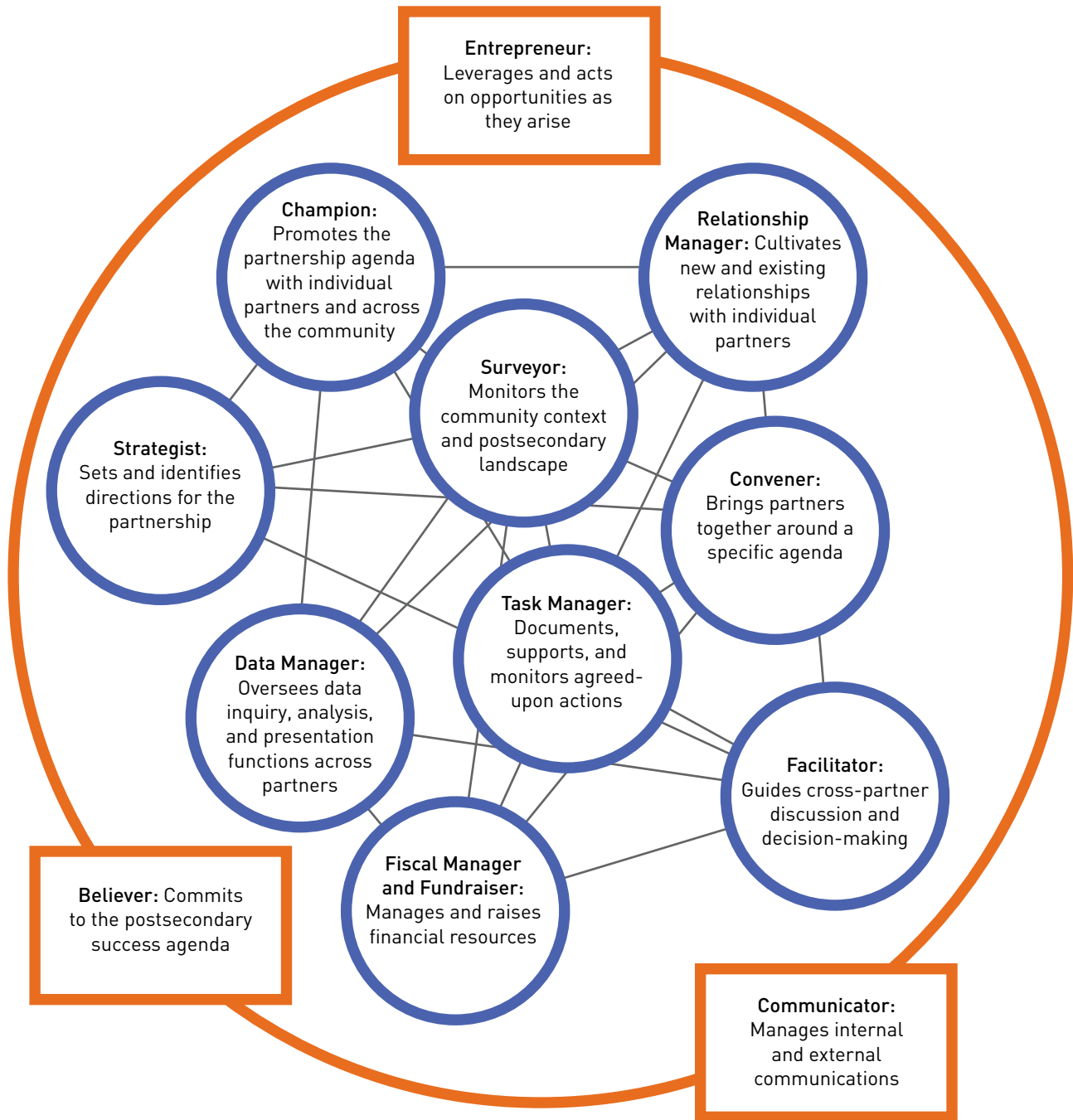
**Tailor the roles and responsibilities of the lead organization to its strengths; rely on partners to provide missing capacities: Take time to understand the unique strengths of the partnership's lead organization(s); compare these capacities to those necessary to lead the work, while drawing on other partners' skills and expertise to fill gaps.**

Although a wide range of institutions (e.g., philanthropies, colleges and universities, K-12 school districts, and city offices) played the “lead” role within Community Partnerships sites, a set of common critical roles and responsibilities emerged.

Lead organizations championed the agenda, assessed the community's needs, set and refined strategy, facilitated and convened partners, managed individual relationships, coordinated the use of data, and managed funds. Lead organizations also demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit — taking advantage of opportunities as they arose. Furthermore, they tailored communications to diverse groups, which enabled them to diversify their partnership membership. Perhaps most importantly, lead organizations demonstrated an authentic commitment to increasing the number of students in their communities with postsecondary credentials and degrees.

However, lead organization(s) alone did not have all the capacities to carry out the partnership's agenda. As a result, the partnerships drew on the expertise of their members to fulfill the leadership and management capacities required to make this work a success. Figure 3 provides an overview of the key leadership capacities partnerships drew on to successfully energize and sustain their postsecondary success agendas.

FIGURE 3: KEY LEADERSHIP CAPACITIES



The strengths of Community Partnerships lead organizations differed. However, some commonalities emerged among specific lead “types:”

An **educational institution** (higher education or K-12 school district) can offer strong data management capacities. In New York City, the school district and city university system had an extensive data collection and analysis capacity that was a central component of Graduate NYC’s work.

A **municipal lead** can serve as a strong champion and convener. In Riverside, the long-term mayor and education champion used his bully-pulpit and extensive personal and political connections to convene and coalesce partners in support of the Completion Counts agenda.

**Local funders** can offer expertise as fundraisers, facilitators, fiscal managers, and surveyors of the landscape. The Amarillo Area Foundation and United Way of Southern Cameron County (Brownsville) attached the Community Partnerships agenda to a larger regional strategy, given their ability to monitor the broader landscape and make connections among their own and others’ investments.

### Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Acknowledge the complex and challenging role of serving as a lead agency
- ✓ Establish processes for reflecting on and providing feedback about lead functions (e.g., third-party interviews across partners on an annual basis)
- ✓ Empower lead entities to embrace an entrepreneurial spirit, communicate with diverse stakeholders, and engage in a relentless pursuit of the postsecondary success agenda
- ✓ Address gaps in capacity by connecting a lead organization or organizations to partners that offer complementary capacities (include external consultants when needed)
- ✓ Ensure that the most senior members of the lead organization(s) are supportive of the partnership’s agenda – an organization’s influence is fueled by the support of its leaders

**Structure a team for strategy, operations, and action: While structures varied, partnerships shared a focus on three core functions to drive their local postsecondary agenda forward: (1) setting and refining strategic direction, (2) managing partnership operations, and (3) identifying and implementing agreed-upon actions.**

To ensure that partnerships identified and operationalized their work effectively, sites engaged in three critical activities:

- **Setting and refining strategy:** Communities often developed an executive or leadership team to secure and maintain buy-in among executive and operational leaders. This group set, monitored, and refined the partnership’s direction.
- **Managing partnership operations:** Communities pulled together staff members — both formally and informally — from across organizations to oversee the partnership’s operations. This group implemented the partnership’s strategy and ensured that its members were equipped to carry it out.
- **Identifying and implementing partnership actions that advance the postsecondary success agenda:** Communities created work teams and committees organized around specific topics (e.g., disenfranchised youth, workforce development, and data) and/or strategies to carry out activities on behalf of the partnership.

Figure 4 provides examples of structures that partnerships created to operationalize these three activities.

**FIGURE 4: EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES**

PARTNERSHIP FUNCTIONS	EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES		
STRATEGY	<p><b>Inclusive leadership group:</b> Includes leaders from all partners (usually 20-30 people)</p>	<p><b>Executive team:</b> Includes executive leadership from a “core” group of partners (often less than 10 people)</p>	<p><b>Steering committee:</b> Includes executives and other leaders from a “core” group of partners; may include additional representatives from other groups.</p>
OPERATIONS*	<p><b>Lead organization:</b> Draws on multiple levels of organization staff, including executive leadership, to support lead role</p>	<p><b>Core team from multiple organizations:</b> Includes representatives — often mid-level leaders — from a “core” group of partners. One organization may also serve as the “fiscal” lead.</p>	<p><b>Staff within an organization/institution:</b> Includes an employee who sits within a particular institution, but whose time is dedicated to the initiative’s agenda</p>
ACTION	<p><b>Working groups:</b> Groups that come together around topics to develop and implement specific actions in the community</p>	<p><b>Taskforces:</b> Generally have same function as working groups; other names for similar work include work team and subcommittee.</p>	<p><b>Ad-hoc subcommittees:</b> Groups that come together around a topic and set of tasks within a specific time-frame. The group will end once tasks are complete.</p>

\*Operations staff often served on strategy and action teams.

## Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Assemble a team of strategic thinkers who have authority to guide major decisions appropriate for the community
- ✓ Involve key civic and community leaders who can build commitment to the partnership's agenda on the executive/leadership level
- ✓ Assign a manager or coordinator who can organize the work and facilitate relationships among partners at every level of the partnership
- ✓ Determine decision-making processes: Who needs to be involved in each decision? Who has the authority to make those decisions?
- ✓ Develop a plan for cross-level communication; it is essential that partners across all levels, including between work groups, are aware of each other's activities, progress, and challenges.

## Establishing New Partnership Processes in Raleigh, NC

The Raleigh College and Community Collaborative (RCCC) entered its second year of implementation with a strong partnership structure clear about decision-making authority and processes. The partnership also had established eight action teams to advance the work of the Raleigh Promise. Despite a structure that seemed to work well, partners recognized gaps in understanding about the work across the partnership — action teams were operating in isolation, and partners were unclear about what challenges and successes others were having. As a result, RCCC changed its meeting structure, adding monthly meetings among action team chairpersons to provide a forum for sharing and aligning activities. Each action team established a set of goals and objectives, and these new meetings enabled team leaders to update their team's progress against those targets. As a result, partners could communicate more effectively about their work, align their efforts with the partnership's vision, and measure progress against pre-determined goals.

**Leverage community capacity, but know when to engage someone from the outside: Strong partnerships used expertise from inside and outside the community. Members of the community should conduct the majority of work in a place-based, cross-sector partnership. However, the Community Partnerships sites discovered that experts external to the partnership — and even the community — can bring value to the initiative.**

Cross-sector partnerships depended primarily on the skills and expertise of the partners and organizations at the table. These types of partnerships have deep knowledge about the culture and dynamics of the community. As a result, their solutions often have more resonance (and staying power), given that they are rooted in the local context.

For example, many communities pursued curriculum alignment between K-12 school districts and the local community college. In each community, this work drew on unique community assets — different departments within the colleges, different offices at the school district, different funding streams, and different structures and processes for developing curricula. The knowledge of the local educational landscape, combined with the expertise of those within the educational systems, allowed partnerships to rely on internal expertise to identify solutions appropriate for their communities' students.

On the other hand, Community Partnerships sites often relied on external expertise to fill gaps in capacity or to offer a fresh perspective. External experts typically were engaged for one of three reasons: 1) they brought highly specialized technical expertise beyond partner capabilities, 2) they offered a level of objectivity possessed only by someone from outside the partnership or community, or 3) they could devote more resources (e.g., time, financial, expertise) than partners or community members. In each case, engaging external expertise allowed communities to use their own resources more effectively.

Figure 5 provides an overview of how the Community Partnerships sites used internal and external expertise in their projects.

**FIGURE 5: HOW THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SITES USED INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXPERTISE**

	INTERNAL PARTNERSHIP ASSETS	EXTERNAL ASSETS
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>	Communications staff from partnership member organizations developed communication plans, including outreach to local media.	Partnerships worked with communication consultants to develop “brands” for their initiatives and to support broader communications and marketing strategies.
<b>FUNDRAISING AND SUSTAINABILITY</b>	Local funders helped partnerships understand complex and nuanced aspects of the work, and drew on their expertise to secure resources from other sources.	Partnerships worked with consultants to identify potential funding sources, often around specific projects or more tangible aspects of the work.*
<b>AGENDA SETTING</b>	Partnerships connected to other collaboratives and institutions in the community with complementary agendas.	Partnerships drew on external policy expertise to connect local community effort to state and national policy, as well as external facilitation to guide and develop consensus around a common agenda.*
<b>PARTNERSHIP</b>	Engaged partners leveraged their individual relationships with others in the community, when needed, to support the work.	Partnerships relied on neutral facilitation, especially during key decision points and/or when challenges or opportunities required delicate conversation.*
<b>COMMUNITY DATA INDICATORS</b>	Community colleges, K-12 school districts, and municipal offices used their expertise to link and analyze data within and across systems, as well as to support partnership inquiry about the data.	Partnerships worked with third-party organizations to analyze data, develop data systems, identify indicators, and develop presentations for reports and other external products.
<b>ADDITIONAL DATA USE</b>	Partnerships drew on expertise within member organizations to collect and analyze additional quantitative and qualitative data about and from students, families, and education practitioners to inform strategies and assess progress.	Partnerships drew on external evaluators and researchers to conduct targeted data collection around particular areas of focus; OMG provided evaluation site reports, which offered overarching assessments of progress.

\*Community partnerships drew on coaching and technical assistance from MDC and NLC for these activities.



## Putting Lessons into Practice

- ✓ Assess current priorities and work within individual institutions and organizations; How do these align with the partnership's work?
- ✓ Determine the capacities that each partner can offer, as well as whether partners have the time and resources to volunteer these services
- ✓ Identify tasks that, even if desirable, may not be worth undertaking because of their potential strain on partner resources or relationships
- ✓ Understand the issues that may have political or interpersonal ramifications for the partners, and may be better addressed by an individual or organization external to the community
- ✓ Recognize where input, insight, or guidance from an objective third party can be useful; partners may have trouble making critical decisions when they are so closely connected to a community.

### Clarifying Partner Roles in Mesa, AZ

As a “core partner” in the CLIP initiative, the City of Mesa stated its commitment to the postsecondary success agenda from the beginning, yet struggled to articulate its role in what was primarily an education agenda. Over the course of the grant, however, the city emerged as a champion for education, and agreed to commit funding and staff to Mesa Counts on College beyond the life of the Gates Foundation grant. This shift was the result, in large part, of partners appealing to complementary concerns of the city — making a strong case for the linkage between economic/workforce development and postsecondary success. During the final year of the grant, the city's role in the partnership, with the support of the Mayor and City Manager, crystallized. The city committed to creating an education office, and to providing salary support for a Director of Mesa Counts on College and an administrative staff person for at least two years. Partners attributed this progress to conversations driven by the Gates Foundation investment, and agree that the city's actions became an important step in ensuring the sustainability of the partnership's work.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

Cross-sector partnerships play a critical role in advancing systems change. They provide opportunities for diverse perspectives to influence an agenda, and can serve as a powerful vehicle for implementing that agenda across a community. Over the course of the Community Partnerships work, the lines between “building a partnership” and “building commitment” to the partnership’s agenda blurred. Yet, the partnership structure — and its specific functions — emerged as a critical distinction. While building commitment fosters engagement, a formal partnership structure serves as the mechanism for directing, implementing, and assessing systems change. While stakeholders outside of the partnership can still contribute in a significant way, the partnership is ultimately responsible for leading, coordinating, and implementing activities to advance the community agenda.

Communities with a strong partnership build a foundation on which they can sustain the work, even amid changing social, political, and economic climates. Partnership activity may ebb and flow. But, a strong base of diverse partners, built around the capacities of its lead organization and members, can change the way individuals and organizations work and work together, and can model what larger community-wide collaboration should look like.

As communities and funders continue to support postsecondary success across the country, they must consider key questions as they create and strengthen strategies to develop partnerships and, ultimately, catalyze systems change.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES

What does an “ideal” partnership look like in a community?

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Who (people and organizations) can effectively lead an agenda in the best interest of the community?

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What capacities do partners bring to the work, and who can supplement those capacities?

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### CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNDERS

How can funders promote the pursuit of community, rather than institutional, success?

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How can investments be structured to support critical partnership functions, including strategy development, partnership management, and implementation?

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What resources can funders provide to supplement a community’s expertise and capacities?

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