Amplifying Learning
in Systems Change
Investments:

An Experience in
Developmental Evaluation

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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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.

Introduction

In recent years, a variety of national and regional foundations, and other social funders, have shifted their investments from supporting individual programs to catalyzing community or "system" level change efforts. These investments can reconfigure and realign systems to affect large numbers of individuals, and achieve impact "at scale," but they also are inherently more complex and highly context-specific. As a result, the path to impact often is less clear, especially early in the investment. Furthermore, determining *which* investment strategies, and under what conditions those strategies may produce results, can be challenging. In these circumstances, a developmental evaluation can inform and refine the investment strategy to increase the likelihood of impact, while identifying the most appropriate progress measures.

The evaluation field has benefited from a myriad of developmental evaluation resources. In this Issue Brief, we share our experiences conducting a developmental evaluation of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Community Partnerships portfolio. Our aim with this Brief is to offer practical lessons to the field about what we learned during the initiative.

This Issue Brief answers two questions: **1. WHEN** is developmental evaluation a good approach? and **2. HOW** can communities, evaluators, and funders engage effectively in a developmental evaluation?

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, communities received Community Partnerships funding through two 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

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

When is Developmental Evaluation a Good Approach?
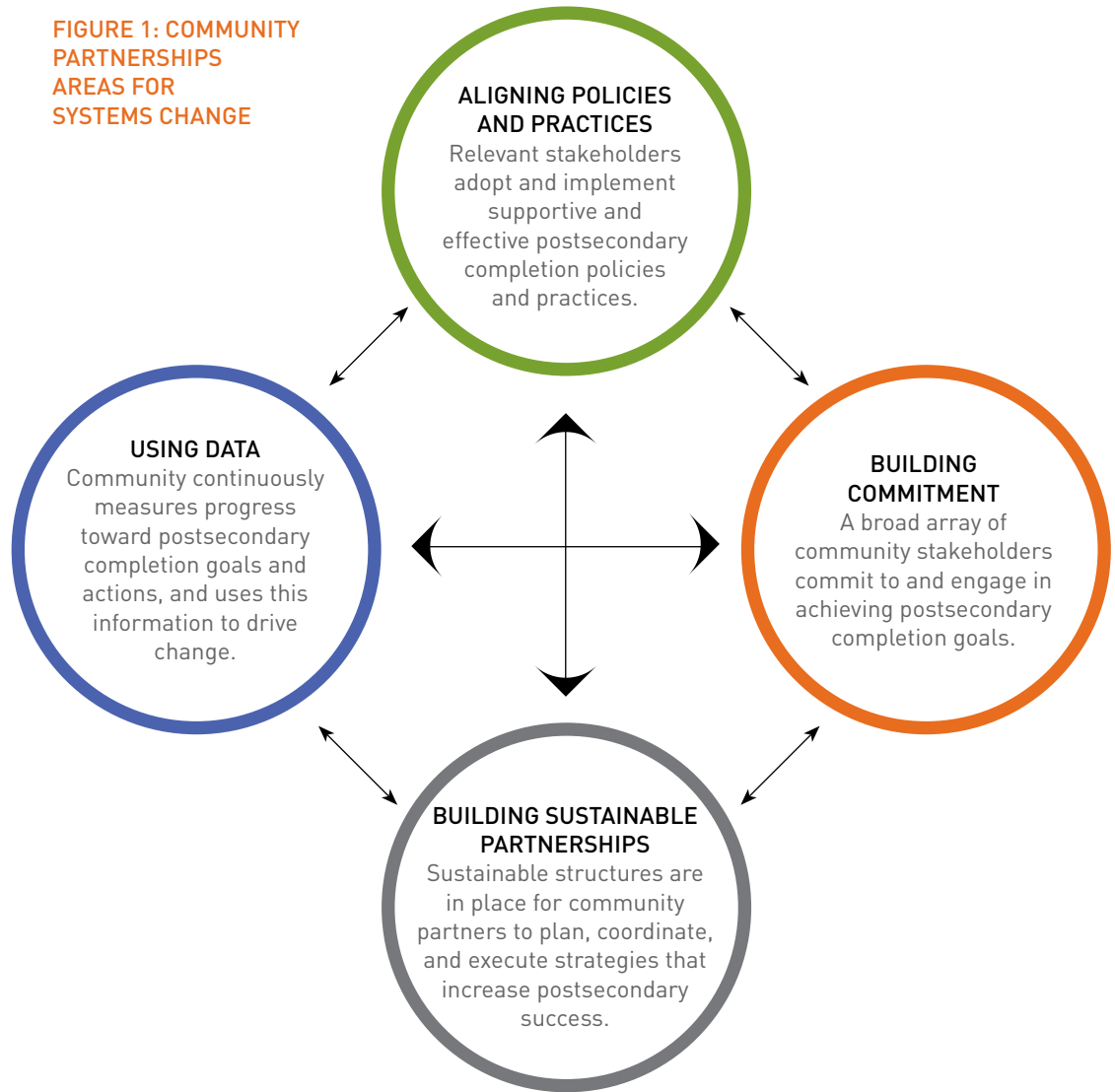
DEVELOPMENTAL, FORMATIVE, AND SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Over the period of this investment, our evaluation shifted to include formative and summative assessments, relying on many of the frameworks and analytical approaches that we continued to hone and refine through our developmental approach. Developmental components continued to exist even as our evaluation turned toward a more formative and even summative focus.

Developmental evaluation is particularly well suited for efforts or interventions that are highly innovative, in the early stages of development, or that occur in complex and/or shifting environments. Similarly, it can be a good approach for relatively new strategies that require timely information to help inform design and support implementation.

From the beginning, the Community Partnerships sites used a loosely defined Theory of Change, which 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.

**ALIGNING POLICIES
AND PRACTICES**
Relevant stakeholders
adopt and implement
supportive and
effective postsecondary
completion policies
and practices.

USING DATA
Community continuously
measures progress
toward postsecondary
completion goals and
actions, and uses this
information to drive
change.

**BUILDING
COMMITMENT**
A broad array of
community stakeholders
commit to and engage in
achieving postsecondary
completion goals.

**BUILDING SUSTAINABLE
PARTNERSHIPS**
Sustainable structures are
in place for community
partners to plan, coordinate,
and execute strategies that
increase postsecondary
success.

The Community Partnerships investment was highly innovative and deliberately under-developed. It was up to the individual communities and their technical assistance providers, armed with deep knowledge about their local context, to make sense of these four "buckets," and shape the work as they saw fit. As the evaluation partner, the OMG Center documented communities' approaches, shared what we observed, and helped fine tune strategies "on the ground." We asked hard questions, elevated themes, helped partners understand our findings, and together refined the Theory of Change based on the *reality* of change. Over the course of the evaluation, our understanding of the effective strategies evolved, as did our understanding of how best to measure systemic shifts resulting from the Community Partnerships investment.

For initiatives like the Community Partnerships portfolio, developmental evaluation offers an approach that 1) increases learning as implementation unfolds, 2) helps stakeholders respond to this learning in a timely fashion, 3) supports the success of the innovative investment, and 4) informs the right measures for tracking progress.

How Can Communities, Evaluators, and Funders Engage Effectively in a Developmental Evaluation?

We began the Community Partnerships portfolio evaluation with some basic ideas about how to implement a developmental evaluation:

1. **Include a variety of stakeholders** — grantmakers, grantees, intermediaries, and site-level partners — at all stages of the evaluation process

2. **Reframe our role** as integral members of the team focused on learning, rather than as external, objective observers who measure success

3. **Counsel partners** that an evaluation offers an opportunity to refine approaches and improve implementation to achieve maximum impact; it is not an audit exercise.

Based on trial and error, numerous workplan and methodological refinements, and countless reflection sessions, we uncovered important lessons for grantmakers, evaluators, and practitioners as they consider the promise and challenge of developmental evaluation.

*   **Emphasize learning, rather than measuring the achievement of specific outcomes**

*   **Recognize the dual purpose of a Theory of Change: To guide implementation *and* learning**

*   **Create opportunities to reflect and strategize with stakeholders**

*   **Rethink the purpose of deliverables — use them to generate reflection and refinement**

Emphasize learning, rather than measuring the achievement of specific outcomes

Grantmakers and grantees may be more accustomed to traditional formative and summative evaluations. When engaging in a developmental approach, evaluators should ensure that stakeholders are clear about and comfortable with two specific differences from traditional evaluation methods:

A developmental evaluation will simultaneously identify and measure progress against outcomes and indicators. The emergent nature of large, complex initiatives — which are best suited for developmental evaluation — means that measures of "progress"

likely will evolve over time. While the long-term goals of the initiative may be clear, markers of progress and indicators of intermediate success can be less explicit. As initiatives unfold, evaluators are tasked with facilitating learning that helps stakeholders develop a sense for what the initiative should look like, and how it can operate to meet its long-term goals. As a result, the evolving framework may give grantees and other stakeholders a feeling that expectations are shifting, or that the initiative's goals are a "moving target." In the case of the Community Partnerships portfolio, the initial Theory of Change, and its outcomes and indicators, gave communities a sense of direction. As changes were made to the outcome areas and the indicators, many partners — the foundation staff, intermediaries, and grantees — provided input and vetted the revisions shared by the evaluation team. Over the course of the investment, we revisited the Theory of Change and the corresponding outcomes and indicators framework three times: following the planning phase, after one year of implementation, and at the end of the initiative.

Evaluation methodologies and questions will shift over the course of the investment. Learning, rather than adhering to predetermined methodologies, should guide data collection methods. During the evaluation, we tested and abandoned five to six substantial methodologies and data collection approaches, including a template to track policy and practice changes, media scans, annual partnership surveys, and a contextual factors analysis. Each of these data collection methods seemed appropriate at the outset of the initiative, but over time, no longer aligned with "what we needed to know" as sites engaged in their work. Similarly, as we learned more about the work communities undertook, and as new questions emerged over the course of the initiative, we identified more appropriate data collection methods. These shifts represent a different approach from summative evaluations, where static data collection instruments are developed to assess predetermined concepts at the outset of the evaluation.

Putting Lessons into Practice

✓ Identify audiences for the evaluation, and the questions those audiences hope the evaluation will answer

✓ Understand and communicate how the evaluation findings will be used. Will they be used for accountability purposes, communications, to inform a national Learning Community, or to set policy recommendations?

✓ Articulate when and how the evaluation can meet stakeholders' needs and expectations, and where there is possible misalignment

✓ Develop materials and schematics to help stakeholders understand how they will be engaged in the evaluation, when, and how this engagement can meet their expressed needs and answer their critical questions

✓ Build in periodic evaluation "refresh" sessions. These sessions provide opportunities to refine the evaluation questions, methods, stakeholder engagement, lines of communication, and timelines.

Recognize the dual purpose of a Theory of Change: To guide implementation *and* learning

In developmental evaluations, Theories of Change serve as a point of reference for learning and interpretation across stakeholders, about *what* is happening and *why*. They are not meant to prescribe what *should* happen. This approach enables the evaluators and the stakeholders to ask: Do we think this is still true? Have we learned something new that makes us think differently about how change happens?

In the Community Partnerships work, the Theory of Change was intentionally ambiguous, providing space for the sites to experiment with and customize approaches based on their contexts. As the investment progressed, we lessened the ambiguity of the Theory of Change by elevating examples of how change can take place in diverse contexts.

Once the Community Partnerships sites started their initiatives, we "tested" that work against the Theory of Change. As the communities solidified implementation, and as we saw similarities and differences in their strategies to advance a postsecondary success agenda, we refined the Theory of Change and its expectations. Additionally, we allowed for the possibility that some of the greatest paths to success might not be reflected in the Theory of Change, and, as a result, remained open to strategies that we had not accounted for in our initial thinking. Through identifying repeated "unintended" outcomes — good and bad — we uncovered areas of activity that we would have missed otherwise.

Putting Lessons into Practice

✓ Refrain from jumping directly to the expected activities or outcomes when developing a Theory of Change. Rather, pay attention to stakeholders' assumptions about why certain strategies are appropriate. *Then*, develop methods to observe and test these assumptions and track contextual changes.

✓ Develop formal and informal processes to revisit the Theory of Change following virtually every single point of data collection. Use these opportunities to refine the framework.

✓ Recognize that some of the most important lessons in the work may emerge from unintended consequences. Remain open to the possibility that the greatest successes may not be reflected in the Theory of Change.

✓ Ensure that stakeholders understand the shift from using data to *refine* the Theory of Change to *assessing* progress along the framework (i.e., when shifting from a developmental evaluation to a formative or summative stage). During the final 18 months of the evaluation, we assessed site progress along a continuum of Theory of Change outcomes and indicators that reflected our evolving understanding of how communities tackle "systems change."

Create opportunities to reflect and strategize with stakeholders

Developmental evaluation breaks from traditional evaluation practices by de-emphasizing the objective evaluation partner, instead embracing the richness of perspectives to understand a community approach. In short, a developmental evaluation focuses on understanding the *whole picture*, and *nuanced interpretations* of that picture, rather than valuing a single "objective" perspective.

The power of a developmental approach is in the space it creates for reflection and strategy refinement based on timely data collection and interpretation. Seeking as many perspectives and involving as many stakeholders as possible — rather than the evaluator singularly determining what is "good" — makes for richer conversation and a more grounded strategy. It also builds collective trust and dedication. Because the goal of developmental evaluation is to advance innovation in complex systems, it is critical that diverse viewpoints and actors within those systems are given the opportunity for input. Through such conversations, evaluators and other stakeholders can gain clarity on the actions stakeholders have taken within a particular initiative, and can work with stakeholders to interpret the data in a way that is useful for informing future actions.

Putting Lessons into Practice

✓ Identify who needs to be involved in the evaluation, and when. Think well beyond the box of traditional evaluation audiences (e.g., grantees, intermediaries, and funders), and consider community partners, content experts, and individuals intimately and peripherally involved with the work. Include individuals who may have differing perspectives based on their personal and professional experiences, and privileges and power that they have in the community. Revisit this list of evaluation stakeholders regularly, ensuring the right balance of diverse perspectives.

✓ Develop processes and structures to engage these individuals in making sense of evaluation findings

✓ Clarify how information will be used. Ensure that the evaluation stakeholders understand *when* and *why* they are being engaged (e.g., to collect additional information, test ideas and findings, provide input into data analysis, or hear recommendations they will need to act on).

Rethink the purpose of deliverables — use them to generate reflection and refinement

In a developmental evaluation, evaluators accept greater responsibility for the use of evaluation information, sharing deliverables in ways that enable discussion, feedback, and cross-stakeholder conversations. While traditional deliverables offer important opportunities for learning and dialogue, evaluators should structure deliverables as part of an ongoing reflection process. Sharing findings in an annual project report is not enough.

The Community Partnerships portfolio consisted of seven implementation sites (each with partnerships of 10-25 individuals), two technical assistance providers, and one foundation. As a result, there were numerous points of interaction and reflection — written and verbal. For instance, we provided individual site reports, annual cross-site analyses, and a final summative report. We also created rapid feedback memos, brief presentations at Learning Community meetings, and documents highlighting key project lessons. In most instances, we conducted follow-up debriefs with the funder, the intermediary, and with each site. While this represented an overwhelming amount of information, we targeted deliverables to specific stakeholders, created them in the most appropriate format, and timed them to support other project-related milestones, deadlines, and phases of work.

Putting Lessons into Practice

✓ Work with evaluation stakeholders to understand their major decision points, or project-related milestones, to time data collection and deliverables

✓ Provide deliverables in a way that promotes learning and use (e.g., a series of reflection questions, bulleted observations in a memo format, a conversation, or a graphic)

✓ Follow up with stakeholders to assess the utility of the deliverables, and refine these as necessary, making sure they are as action-oriented as possible

✓ Hold periodic "expectation setting" conversations to ensure that deliverables answer stakeholder evaluation questions as they evolve

Some Concluding Thoughts

In many ways, developmental evaluation helps stakeholders piece together a puzzle without the benefit of a defined picture to guide their efforts. Furthermore, it helps to bring that picture into clearer focus for future investments. Developmental evaluation often helps answer questions about how communities take on complex and/or innovative initiatives, how they look different as a result of those initiatives, *and* what it takes to get there. Understanding these elements of change and how they link to on-the-ground impact — in the Community Partnerships context, creating systems that support postsecondary success — is imperative in turning ambitious goals of systems and institutional change into reality.

In the Community Partnerships evaluation, a developmental approach provided us with the nimble and responsive path necessary to understand how local innovation occurred, and how communities tackled a complex systems change agenda. This approach generated learning across partners, and led to the companion Issue Briefs focusing on each Theory of Change area: (1) building commitment, (2) using data, 3) aligning policies and practices, and 4) building and sustaining partnerships. Aligned with the goals of a developmental evaluation, we hope these Briefs advance readers' understanding of how communities can engage in cross-sector, community-based approaches to improving postsecondary success.

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