THE INTERSECTOR PROJECT

A RESEARCH AGENDA TO ADVANCE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY

* This Agenda reflects our thinking at the time of publication — It is updated as the field and our own thinking develop.

Increasingly, addressing complex problems requires cross-sector collaboration, "the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately" (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006). Research on the practice of cross-sector collaboration has the potential to significantly contribute to partnerships for public good by providing novel, generalizable, and actionable insights for the world of practice and equipping practitioners with evidence-based decision-making tools. For this reason, we have assembled this Research Agenda to Advance Cross-sector Collaboration — a non-exhaustive list of questions for the research community that we believe, if addressed, would significantly advance the practice of collaboration among the government, business, and non-profit sectors.

This Research Agenda is informed by our exposure to recent relevant literature, frequent learning conversations with practitioners and supporters of cross-sector collaboration, and detailed input from 30 scholars and experts in this field. It is intended to serve as a source of inspiration for the research community, including scholars, graduate students, and individuals from research and policy institutes, professional associations, professional service firms, and more, from a variety of disciplines, including organizational studies, urban planning, public policy and administration, economics, non-profit management, health care, education, the natural environment, and more.

A list of works cited in this Agenda is available at the end of this document.

NOTES ON OUR RESEARCH AGENDA
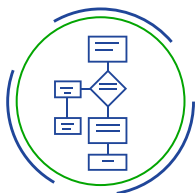
Cross-sector collaboration can take many forms. **These questions may not be relevant for all collaborations**, and the findings for many of these questions will likely vary based on partnership type. The questions presented here represent the broad areas we think are important to address.

There are **challenges to producing generalizable insights relevant to the practice of cross-sector collaboration**. There are significant logistical obstacles to conducting studies based on large samples of cross-sector collaborations, and there are no reliable databases that we're aware of that would allow researchers to draw conclusions based on large samples — limiting researchers in their ability to draw generalizable conclusions about cross-sector collaboration that practitioners can apply to their particular context. Relatedly, there is a lack of funding to complete this kind of rich, empirical research.

Those actively working on collaborative projects have rich knowledge to offer to researchers and vice versa. When possible, **it's beneficial for researchers to partner with practitioners in the design, execution, and presentation of their work**, to increase the potential that the research will be helpful to and relevant for the individuals and organizations engaged in cross-sector collaboration.

THE QUESTIONS

WHAT ARE THE ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND SOCIAL COSTS AND BENEFITS OF CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION, AND WHAT ARE THE METHODS FOR MEASURING THEM?

It has been acknowledged that the costs and benefits of collaboration, both to partners and the public, can be challenging to measure (El Ansari, Phillips & Hammick, 2001), but some attempts have been made. Improvements yielded to public-sector partners have been identified (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011), and attempts to develop and evaluate means for assessing the costs and benefits of cross-sector collaboration have been offered, such as the value creation spectrum (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b), value network mapping (Grudinschi, Hallikas, Kaljunen, Puustinen & Slintonen, 2015), and visual strategy mapping (Bryson, Ackermann & Eden, 2016). Additionally, literature focusing on the economic impact of public-private partnerships in particular (e.g. Chung, 2016; Zangoueinezhad & Azar, 2014; Rakić & Rađenović, 2014) shows that there is much to be explored related to the costs and benefits of other types of cross-sector collaboration, both in comparison to pursuing a single-sector approach and to not addressing the problem at all. Cross-sector collaboration is often a high-risk, high-gain approach. Studying and finding ways of measuring costs and benefits of cross-sector collaboration could enable practitioners to better diagnose opportunities for partnering, understand potential risks, and convey the value of collaboration to internal and external stakeholders.

HOW DO DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND PRACTICES ACROSS AND WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS, AND NON-PROFIT SECTORS INFLUENCE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION?

Attention has been paid to the variances of language, culture, and practices across sectors (Mandell, Keast & Chamberlain, 2016) and disciplines (Stout, 2012), but there is an opportunity to further investigate the role that this variance — both between and within sectors — plays in creating opportunities, such as building social capital through shared language and culture, or barriers, such as disparate ways of describing goals, in the context of cross-sector collaboration. Better understanding the influence of language-related, cultural, or practical differences on collaboration — and to what extent practitioners are able to learn a new shared language through collaboration — could help partners avoid pitfalls, such as incommensurate methods of data collection.

WHAT CONTEXTUAL FACTORS ARE MOST INFLUENTIAL ON A CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION'S PROBABILITY FOR SUCCESS?

While initial conditions affecting partnership formation have been interrogated (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Bryson, Crosby & Stone 2015), a more detailed assessment of the influence of contextual factors on a collaboration's probability for success over its lifetime is needed. A greater understanding of contextual factors — such as the alignment between a collaboration's aims and a mayoral priority or whether the collaboration's funding source is public or private — can help practitioners evaluate in what context cross-sector collaboration can produce better outcomes and make informed decisions about whether to enter into collaborative work.

WHICH MODELS OF CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION WOULD BEST SERVE THE TYPE OF PROBLEM THAT CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERS SEEK TO ADDRESS AND THE CONTEXTS IN WHICH THEY ARE WORKING?

Cross-sector collaboration takes many forms — collaborative governance, collective impact, pay for success, and traditional, contractual public-private partnerships, for example — each involving different processes and structures. A great number of case studies of individual types of collaboration and a few comprehensive analyses of collaboration types exist (Boyer & Rogers, 2015). But investigation into which models of cross-sector collaboration are best suited for certain local contexts is lacking, as is research into which models work best for which problem types — addressing a high homelessness rate may call for a different model than improving an ineffective workforce development program, for example. This research could allow practitioners to make more informed decisions when choosing a collaborative model and thus design and implement more effective cross-sector collaborations.

WHAT LESSONS ABOUT HOW TO COLLABORATE SUCCESSFULLY CAN BE GLEANED FROM STUDYING FAILURE — THROUGH BOTH IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF SPECIFIC FEATURES OF FAILED CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS AND COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF FAILED CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS?

While a few thorough analyses of particular features in failed collaborations have been carried out (Keyton, Ford, & Smith, 2008; Milam & Heath, 2014), and a modest number of case studies of failed collaborations have been published (Sanders 2016; Andrews & Entwistle, 2010; Hodge & Greve, 2007), the potential in studying failure has not yet been fully realized. Just as case examples of success provide insights into how key structures,

THE QUESTIONS (CONT.)

choices, practices, and processes may have influenced collaboration outcomes, examples of collaborations in which desired outcomes or partner dynamics were not achieved can also import guidance for successfully collaborating. Research has suggested that failure can be "a powerful engine of population-level learning," particularly for public managers (Miner, Kim, Holzinger & Haunschild, 1999). Moreover, researchers may have a unique opportunity to access examples of failed partnerships — While partners are often reluctant to share stories of failure, many researchers are perceived as disinterested observers who are gathering information to create learning opportunities for others.

HOW DO GAPS IN THE U.S. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE MAKE IT CHALLENGING FOR PRACTITIONERS TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES?

Scholars have researched laws governing collaborative governance (Amsler, 2016; Bingham 2010; Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary, 2005) — laws that define how public agencies can work with community members and the private sector to form policy, for example — and some have found significant gaps in state legal frameworks (Amsler, 2016). Yet the degree to which laws regarding collaborative governance impede or catalyze its practice is not fully interrogated. In some instances, legal frameworks do exist to enable multi-actor and cross-organizational collaboration but are little known or have been underused. Additionally, the fact that cross-sector collaborations can operate across jurisdictions (for example local, regional, state, and national) can challenge partners' ability to recognize, comply with, and utilize laws when working on collaborative processes involving the public sector. A robust understanding of relationships between local, regional, state, and national policy, and of the obstacles and opportunities that collaborative governance policy presents, could be helpful for policymakers (as well as for those who seek to influence them) working to enable and encourage collaborative processes.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF HEIGHTENED PUBLIC AWARENESS OF CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION FOR INITIATING NEW AND SUSTAINING ONGOING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS?

Political science literature has confirmed a "substantial connection" between public opinion and public policy (Shapiro, 2011), suggesting there may be insights to be gleaned from studying how public awareness and opinion of cross-sector collaboration may ultimately influence the collaborative agendas of public-sector leaders, the success of cross-sector collaborations in which the public sector is a partner, collaborative policymaking efforts, and more. Yet despite rich research on the governance, management, and financing of cross-sector collaboration, literature has relatively little to say on the subject of public perceptions of cross-sector collaboration and how this might influence the practice. It has been observed that citizens' experiences as members of cross-sector collaboration positively influence their understanding of the value of a cross-sector approach (Conner, 2016). There are also many single initiative case studies that assess collaboration members' perceptions of their own collaborative work (Johnson et al., 2012), as well as field- and issue-wide studies of the question (Mattessich & Rausch, 2014). Yet there are few, if any, published attempts to marry public perceptions research or similar lines of inquiry with cross-sector collaboration to assess public views on the topic more broadly — among both the general public and citizens who have been impacted by a particular cross-sector collaboration. While the public may be aware of specific examples of cross-sector collaboration, public awareness of the wider phenomenon may be lacking. Understanding the potential influence of public awareness on cross-sector collaboration could guide leaders, funders, and supporters of cross-sector work in planning for efforts to affect public awareness, both as it relates to particular collaborative initiatives and to cross-sector collaboration generally as a model for addressing public problems.

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