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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

How can cross-sector
partnerships lead to stronger
volunteer programs?

With 20,000 employees, an impressive 293 million visitors last year, and national park sites in 27 states, the U.S. National Park Service's work is expansive both in scope and geography. In order to actualize its mission of preserving "the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations," NPS works with thousands of outside organizations. An article recently published in *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, "Structures, Challenges, and Successes of Volunteer Programs Co-managed by Nonprofit and Public Organizations" (onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/nml.21206/abstract), takes a close look at successful cross-sector partnerships among NPS and non-profit organizations to co-manage volunteer programs, "a growing, but previously unexamined phenomenon," at several national park sites including Acadia, Arches and Canyonlands, Cuyahoga Valley,

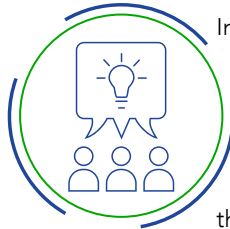
Golden Gate, the National Mall, and Yosemite.

The findings of authors Joe Follman, Adjunct Professor and Program Administrator at George Washington University, Maria Cseh, Associate Professor at George Washington University, and Jeffrey Brudney, Professor of Innovation in the Nonprofit Sector at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, suggest that volunteer programs co-managed by organizations from multiple sectors that employ a combination of research-based best practices, including those listed below, result in expanded volunteer programs and stronger partnerships. “The more of these strategies volunteer program managers can employ, and the more effectively they use them, the more likely they are both to grow their volunteer programs and to improve their partnerships,” the article states. Moreover, the more successful cross-sector partnerships studied also attracted additional partners and resources.

Of 14 NPS sites originally assessed for the article, the top six were chosen for further study consisting of visits to the sites for more in-depth understanding and data-gathering, and participant observation at three of these six sites. Research also consisted of 33 semi-structured interviews with NPS and non-profit staff involved in the co-managed volunteer programs and analysis of documents related to the programs. The findings are of interest to individuals and organizations involved in government-non-profit partnerships in the area in land conservation. Takeaways will also be of interest to leaders seeking to begin, expand, improve, or sustain cross-sector partnerships involving government and non-profit partners, as well as supervisors of partnerships involving joint planning, recruiting, cost sharing, use of equipment, logistical arrangements, data gathering, and reporting.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

CRAFT A SHARED PROGRAM MISSION AND GOALS WITH LEADERS FROM ALL PARTNERING ORGANIZATION(S) TO SERVE AS A BEACON FOR CROSS-SECTOR STAFF.



In the case of partnerships between the NPS and the non-profits devoted to the national parks, the partners had very similar missions, but despite these similarities, they still faced challenges in working together. Leadership from partnering sectors should meet multiple times to capture in writing the “communal will of both these organizations,” which should then be vetted and approved by key stakeholders from each partnering organization. Follman shared in a phone conversation with The Intersector Project that the mission and goals “served as a beacon” for staff from either sector to follow in designing the programs. Follman also shared that the three strongest partnerships in this study spent a great deal of time discussing, drafting, and sharing feedback to “develop specific missions and goals governing their volunteer program partnership and that further laid out who was doing what and how it was supposed to work.”

- For an example of a jointly crafted shared mission and goals document for both internal and external audiences, see the Golden Gate Volunteers in Park Program Mission (intersector.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Vol-Mission-Goals-GGNRA.pdf). Especially see the last few pages of the document that outline highly detailed goals and objectives for the partnership’s work.
- For a guide to jointly identifying desired outcomes related to a challenge, see The Objective Assessment, in the “Partnership Development Toolkit” (ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/data/document/pdtoolkit_en.pdf, found in [Section 2.2: Problem and Objective Assessment on pages 17-22](#)). The assessment guides partners through a voting process for prioritizing approaches to the shared vision of success.

CREATE WRITTEN AGREEMENTS, SUCH AS MEMORANDA OF AGREEMENT (MOA), MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU), OR FEDERALLY APPROVED FORMS OF CONTRACTS, LIKE COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS.

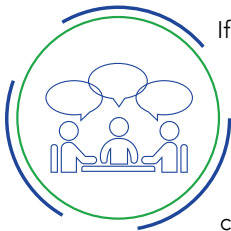


(For more on the differences between MOAs and MOUs, see ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal_consolidated/data/document/pdtoolkit_en.pdf). Despite having a shared goal, partners may still experience challenges around decision making, control over allocating funds, and responsibilities. Building agreements into the partnership’s structure can help partners navigate these conflicts and facilitate the sharing of funds, staff, and equipment (including purchase, maintenance, and storage) among partners. These documents may range in specificity from open-ended guiding documents to highly specific guidelines.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

- ⚙️ For a succinct explanation of when government agencies should use cooperative agreements, as opposed to procurement contracts or grants, see the Environmental Protection Agency's website (epa.gov/grants/federal-grant-and-cooperative-agreement-act-1977).
- ⚙️ For an example of a cooperative agreement between government and non-profit partners, see Saguaro National Park and the Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center's cooperative agreement (buffelgrass.org/sites/default/files/Draft%20Coop%20Agr.pdf).
- ⚙️ For a discussion of how partnership agreements, MOUs, and bylaws can be helpful in formally capturing the governance structure ("accountability structure") upon which partners have agreed, see pp. 23-26 of "Building an Accountability Structure" from StriveTogether (strivetgether.org/sites/default/files/images/AccountabilityStructureToolkit_Final_2015_1.pdf).

CO-LOCATE MULTI-SECTOR STAFF TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS AMONG PARTNERS.



If possible, partners should seek to co-locate staff whose primary work relates to managing the shared initiative. Co-location allows cross-sector partners to receive the same information at the same time, which leads to an increase in joint planning, Follman shared with us. Co-location also allows partners to communicate daily, strengthening both professional and collegial relationships; eliminates turf issues; and, in the cases of the strongest partnerships studied, breaks down barriers between organizations. For example, an NPS ranger at Golden Gate said the cross-sector partnership they were part of was "just seamless" and that "When it comes to 'us' and 'them,' there is no 'them.' It's just an 'us,'" the article reported.

- ⚙️ For discussion and case examples of how co-location can be a useful mechanism for facilitating collaborative work, see the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation's fourth principle of cross-sector collaboration (responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/for-professionals/cross-sector-collaboration/principles-of-cross-sector-collaboration/principle-4).

FOR FURTHER READING



From The Intersector Project Toolkit:

- Share a Vision of Success: The agreement on a set of project goals and ideal outcomes that clarify the mission and priorities of the collaboration (intersector.com/toolkit/share-a-vision-of-success/)
- Build a Common Fact Base: The consensus among collaboration partners as to what facts relating to the issue are most relevant (intersector.com/toolkit/build-a-common-fact-base/)

Other Resources:

- P3 Public Engagement Guidelines: This guide will be useful for identifying and explaining opportunities for citizen engagement throughout various stages of transportation P3s, as well as gaining the localized expertise and experience of community members (p3virginia.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Final_PPTA_Public_Engagement_Handbook_August_2015.pdf).

ABOUT RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Academic research often holds knowledge that can benefit the many practitioners working in cross-sector collaborations. For our Research to Practice series (intersector.com/tag/research-to-practice/), we examine these articles and interview their authors to highlight key facts, actionable takeaways, and additional resources practitioners can turn to for guidance in their cross-sector work.

For more information on our Research to Practice series, please contact us at research@intersector.com.