

BRIEF

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Rethinking value: Perspectives on the benefits of cross-sector collaboratives serving populations with complex health and social needs

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Abstract

Cross-sector collaboration is recognized as an important step in improving health equity and addressing collective challenges facing healthcare, social sector, and public health organizations at the community level. However, different sectors and community stakeholders continue to operate under siloed cultural, operational, and funding structures and contexts.

This project explored how different organizations and community members define and measure the value of cross-sector collaboration by convening key informant focus groups with organizations and also with affiliated community members involved in cross-sector collaborations.

We identified four underlying dimensions contributing to participants' understanding of value: intrinsic benefits, community engagement, outcomes, and sustainable system-level change. Our findings show that defining value as primarily linked to financial considerations does not reflect the nuanced and holistic understanding of this concept that emerged from even a small sample of cross-sector collaboration participants. Across the full and diverse ecosystem of such collaboratives, we would expect understandings of value to be even more rich and dynamic, demonstrating the importance of exploring and defining value as part of collaborative work.

Background

The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers' National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs serves as the home of complex care, a field that addresses the needs of people whose combinations of medical, behavioral health, and social challenges result in high healthcare utilization and poor outcomes.¹ Complex care is best delivered through cross-sector collaborations that can address the diverse needs of community members. Through this research

project, we sought to better understand how the value of cross-sector collaboration is defined and measured by different organizations and community members to strengthen implementation and sustainability of cross-sector collaborative initiatives in the complex care field. This evaluation will be included as a chapter in an upcoming book² by The Georgia Health Policy Center, the national coordinating center for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's national

initiative called Aligning Systems for Health: Health Care + Public Health + Social Services, to be published later in 2022.

Introduction

Cross-sector collaboration is recognized as an important step in improving health equity and addressing collective challenges facing healthcare, social sector, governmental, and public health organizations at the community level.^{3,4,5} A cross-sector approach ensures that shared issues are addressed in a way that incorporates the feedback and expertise of diverse stakeholders. Cross-sector collaboration is particularly important in this time of value-based care, when organizations are increasingly accountable for the holistic well-being of their patients or clients. Given the limited data on this issue, we embarked on a qualitative research study to understand how organizations and community members participating in cross-sector collaboratives define and measure value.

The term “value” generally has financial connotations when applied to a project or program, often referring to a return-on-investment or cost savings potential. However, when considering the distinct cultural, operational, and funding contexts of participants collaborating across sectors, there is no common understanding of what makes these cross-sector partnerships valuable for organizations or their communities, which measures demonstrate the “value” of collaborations, and whether “value” is solely financial in nature.

While meaningful community engagement has long been acknowledged as best practice in cross-sector collaboration, organizations are in varying stages of incorporating community voices into their programs and cross-sector collaboratives.⁶ Without consistent community engagement in these projects, there is often a lack of understanding about what individuals and communities value in cross-sector collaboratives.

Methods

The research team used a qualitative, grounded theory, and participatory approach for this project.⁷ We chose this approach to support the discovery of abstract and subjective themes, as well as relationships associated with the concept of value creation in the context of diverse cross-sector collaborations.

We convened five key informant focus groups with the National Center's five Community Ecosystem Learning Collaborative sites and three focus groups with community members affiliated with the Learning Collaborative projects, including past and current program participants and community advisors.⁸ Learning Collaborative participants represented diverse sectors including healthcare, social services, county government, homeless services, behavioral health, and criminal justice. Community advisors included current or previous patients, clients, or community members who have experienced significant health and/or social needs. Participation in focus groups was voluntary and not connected to other learning collaborative activities.

Camden Coalition staff members moderated the focus groups. We applied a grounded theory method to capture participants' voices and emergent themes.⁹ While the term “value” was central to our research questions and analysis, we avoided using it in interviews in order to avoid suggesting any of our own preconceived notions to participants. Instead, we incorporated words such as “benefit” and “impact” to better understand the concepts behind the term.

Preliminary findings were shared back with the focus group participants and their feedback was incorporated into the analysis. We provided gift cards to community focus group participants in recognition of their time. The research study was deemed IRB-exempt.

Findings

Through the organizational and community member focus groups we heard many different ways that participants think about the value of cross-sector collaboration. Participants' responses often shifted as they reflected individual, organizational, community, or collective perspectives. Across these perspectives, we identified four underlying dimensions contributing to participants' understanding of value. Specifically, participants told us that cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they: **provide intrinsic benefits** by aligning with shared personal and organizational purpose; **engage communities** to ground collaboratives in community members' priorities and insights; **demonstrate outcomes** that matter to organizations and communities; and **lead to sustained system-level change**.

Intrinsic benefits

Cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they align with shared purpose – the missions, values, and beliefs that motivate individuals and organizations to action.

Focus group participants described the intrinsic benefits that individuals and organizations experience through their collaborative work. Moral and humanitarian motivations were a prominent theme, with participants in both the organizational and community focus groups highlighting the importance of alignment with personal and organizational mission or moral beliefs. For example, many organizational focus group participants noted that health disparities and inequities were an organizational priority and shared the view that individual organizations cannot address these upstream issues on their own. The cross-sector collaborations aligned with their sense of interdependence with community entities.

Focus group participants also appreciated the experience of sharing information for innovation and

“I’ve always said that I wanted to do mentorship. I feel like everybody needs somebody to talk to, especially someone who’s been there who understands what you’re going through, the fears, the worries, the joys. I would just love to be that for somebody.” - **Community member focus group participant**

“From the healthcare perspective, we’ve known for years that health disparities and social inequities exist and have always approached every child with an equity lens. But sometimes it’s really just been talk and I think now we’re ready for action – and the only way a healthcare organization can do that is with community partnerships. They can’t ever do it alone.” - **Hospital focus group participant**

best practices, finding joy in participating in collaborative work to solve complex problems. Participants of the community member focus groups expressed the importance of service and giving back to other participants and the community at large. There was a sense that giving back to the organization and the community was therapeutic in and of itself by enhancing a sense of self and finding purpose. They also expressed a sense of duty and commitment to the organization where they received services.

Community engagement

Cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they meaningfully engage community members and individuals with lived experience in identifying needs, developing solutions, and sharing information.

Many of the participants in the organizational focus groups noted the significant impact that community-level factors can have on individual health and well-being. Many healthcare and government organizations acknowledge this fact and have been proactively engaging community institutions in their initiatives to both build trust and gain credibility. Much of this community engagement is conducted with the goals of better understanding the issues that lead to poor health outcomes and gaining buy-in for the resulting collaboration.

“What I would like to see... is a solid relationship with our community partners to be able to understand what affects our patients, our members, our families so that we can better care for them – so we’re not just spinning our wheels and focusing on what we know but [focusing more on] what affects them in their own community.” -**Hospital focus group participant**

Individuals with lived experience had a similar perspective. Participants of the organizational focus groups had varying levels of interaction with these

individuals depending on the sector. As a result, lived experience was incorporated into organizational work to some capacity but not consistently across sectors. Community-based organizations in particular were more likely to involve consumers in program design and implementation.

“We brought some information back to the [organization], and they actually use it and things started working. So now the program has grown and it is just amazing how it does. Sometimes... you don’t think what you’re doing is really working. But you can see it.” -**Community member focus group participant**

Participants in the community member focus groups were, by definition, willing to participate in organizational activities and described a desire to give back to the organization that had helped them. They particularly appreciated when organizational leadership was responsive to their suggestions and stressed the importance of demonstrating results to the community stakeholders to make changes visible. Across the three communities we interviewed, the needs they identified as high priority for themselves and their communities included behavioral health, transportation, and housing.

Outcomes

Cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they demonstrate outcomes, at multiple levels, that are prioritized by community members and organizational participants in the collaborative.

When discussing how they measure and demonstrate value to sustain, enhance, and expand collaboration, organizational focus group participants focused on process and outcome measures associated with the broad aim of their collaborative projects. Participants often described impacting a process measure (e.g., successful completion of a follow-up visit after hospitalization) as a beneficial outcome of cross-sector collaboration, so in this discussion we use the term “outcomes” broadly to refer to both. We found that these outcome measures can be separated into three interrelated categories which include: individual, organizational, and collaborative outcomes.

Individual-level outcomes

Many of the participants in the organizational focus groups provide direct services to individuals with complex health and social needs. They expressed a strong commitment to address individual needs, oftentimes demonstrated by working across organizations. Improving an individual’s experience of care through techniques like trauma-informed care was noted as an important outcome by participants working within community-based organizations, while focus group participants from healthcare organizations tended to apply clinical measures to track individual progress.

Participants of both the organizational and community member focus groups highlighted the importance of

long-term stability and recovery for individuals. For many, this meant ensuring that individuals were able to receive services in community-based settings rather than institutions such as hospitals or jails.

Organizational outcomes

Organizational outcomes tended to be the most well-defined and closely connected to the concept of “value.” Participants from all sectors in the organizational focus groups said their organization’s motivation for participating in the collaborative was to improve client outcomes broadly. They shared that individual-level needs and supporting individual outcomes often serve as organizational metrics of success, especially for organizations focused on serving populations with complex and social needs.

“I think the exciting thing about the collaborative is getting those closer connections and more warm handoffs. So, it’s not just a referral to your own FQHC, but it’s actually working with partners to do a warm handoff.” **-Community-based organization focus group participant**

Due to the wide range of financial incentives and organizational structures, priority organizational outcomes were often specific to the sector represented. For the healthcare sector, outcomes included shifting utilization to appropriate care settings and change in population-level health indicators. Those in county government sought to improve individual outcomes and connection to benefits, and to shift from institutional to community-based services. Streamlining processes and improving individual outcomes were key drivers for community-based organizations.

funding tended to be short-term and limited in scope. In fact, collaborations were often seen as proof-of-concept projects that could result in future funding opportunities while short-term outcomes were not always defined or agreed upon in advance. Overall, participants in the organizational focus groups expressed the belief that sustained collaboration is necessary for long-term change toward a more coordinated, holistic approach to care.

Healthcare	County government	Community-based organizations
Participants from healthcare organizations were more likely to raise value-based payment, capitation, and potential cost savings to their organizations.	County government focus group participants discussed the need for funding of their participation and also the hope of long-term cost savings.	Participants from community-based organizations highlighted the need for funding but rarely raised the concept of a return on investment or cost savings. Sustainability was often framed in terms of long-term outcomes and ongoing collaboration.

Collaborative outcomes

Collaborative outcomes can be described as shared measures across organizations that demonstrate the impact of the collaborative. In general, the various collaboratives highlighted broad goals and were focused on creating solutions to meet the needs of high-risk populations in the short term while addressing long-term, systemic barriers to improved outcomes. We found that organizations were willing to commence collective work without clearly defined and measurable outcomes, and without sustainable funding sources. Organizational focus group participants began identifying other potential outcomes during the focus group discussions, including: a systemic solution and responsive network to address problems and meet needs in the long term; improved referrals, warm handoffs, and engagement; exchange of best practices and resources; and improved trust between organizations.

Overall, organizational participants described how collaboration was not reliably funded and that existing

“One of the true value propositions that I was excited about from this collaborative, is for us to collectively come together and identify what are those data elements that we would like to begin to capture, to measure the interventions that each of us, as part of the collaborative, right, that broader community of stakeholders, is it driving towards that stability and sustainability.”

-Community-based organization focus group participant

Sustainable system-level change

Cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they lead to sustained improvements for individuals with complex health and social needs

Participants in both organizational and community member focus groups expressed significant frustration that the current state of care for individuals with complex needs results in poor outcomes for organizations and individuals. Organizational focus group participants felt that relationships, communication channels, and co-developed solutions between organizations were critical at the start of a collaboration to address systemic issues.

Participants in the organizational focus groups highlighted program sustainability as another important aspect of long-term, system-system level change. In this case, sustainability includes the necessary financial and organizational support and community participation to make a long-term community impact. Overall, organizational participants described how collaboration was not reliably funded and that existing funding tended to be short-term and limited in scope. In fact, collaborations were often seen as proof-of-concept projects that could result in future funding opportunities while short-term outcomes were not always defined or agreed upon in advance. Overall, participants in the organizational focus groups expressed the belief that sustained collaboration is necessary for long-term change toward a more coordinated, holistic approach to care.

“It still feels like at times that the mental health system doesn’t know what to do with individuals, so they’re looking to the criminal justice system to deal with some of the struggles. [This] is not where individuals with serious mental illness belong. They shouldn’t have to access the criminal justice system in order to get treatment.” -**County government focus group participant**

Discussion

The aim of our research study was to better understand how a shared concept of value can be formed out of the diverse perspectives and experiences of different organizations, community members, and individuals with lived experience in order to strengthen the implementation and sustainability of current and future cross-sector collaborative initiatives. We acknowledge that our sample of research participants is limited to individuals and organizations currently participating in a national, cross-sector learning collaborative and working in their respective communities on collaborative initiatives to better serve populations with complex health and social needs. This could limit the applicability of some of our conclusions and recommendations. However, we believe that the following overarching themes of value creation are significant and should be considered in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of cross-sector collaborations.

Value is not solely dependent on financial return on investment

While the concept of value has traditionally been defined by financial outcomes, in this sample, the collective benefit of cross-sector collaborations was perceived more holistically. This reinforces our findings that value is perceived as multidimensional, with each dimension holding varying levels of influence on organizations and individuals, depending on the internal and external contexts. This finding complements recent work on establishing the value case for complex care interventions through the inclusion of non-financial metrics and indicators. ⁹ While participants certainly spoke of financial stability as important, these concerns were balanced with other dimensions of value. Organizations rarely identified anticipated return on investment or cost-savings as the primary benefit of collaborations. Rather, they highlighted a number of domains where this value is expected or already realized.

Value is multidimensional, contextual, and dependent on perspective

Focus group participants described multiple dimensions of cross-sector collaboration’s value, including intrinsic benefits, community engagement, multiple levels of outcomes, and sustainable systems-level change. These dimensions represent factors that influence initial and long-term participation in collaborative efforts. They

should not be considered a checklist for collaboratives but rather as important considerations to sustain activities and demonstrate impact.

Value is created through meaningful community participation

Cross-sector collaborations need formal mechanisms to foster participation and leadership of community members and individuals with lived experiences. Communities benefit when collaborations address community members’ needs and priorities through clear and transparent action, as well as when community members have opportunities to give back to their community by contributing to initiatives. Capacity-building, skill development activities, and financial compensation¹⁰ can help equip individuals with lived experience to participate more fully in collaborative work.

Value is measured through multiple levels of interrelated outcomes

No single outcome can account for a collaboration’s impact in a community. Rather, a broad set of individual, organizational, and collaborative outcomes should be considered when trying to quantify the impact of collaborative efforts across sectors. Defining and identifying these diverse outcomes is often an important activity of emergent cross-sector collaborations and should be tailored to the context and priorities of the stakeholders and communities involved.

Conclusion

Cross-sector collaborations are valuable when they align with individual and organizational purpose, meaningfully engage communities, demonstrate outcomes, and when they grow and sustain system-level change. Cross-sector collaborations have the potential to make a significant impact on health and social inequities, especially for vulnerable populations with complex health and social needs. However, aligning across sectors and building meaningful and lasting partnerships across organizations with different cultures, mandates, funding streams, and regulatory mechanisms is challenging. A deeper and more nuanced understanding of how value is created from diverse perspectives, experiences, and contexts will improve the implementation of these important initiatives.

These findings show that defining value as primarily linked to financial considerations does not reflect the nuanced and holistic understanding of this concept that emerged from even a small sample of cross-sector collaboration participants. Across the full and diverse ecosystem of such collaboratives, we would expect understandings of value to be even more rich and dynamic. Therefore, we suggest framing questions about value at a project's onset to create space for the emergence of varied and holistic understandings about why cross-sector collaboration is important to and how it benefits individuals, organizations, and communities. Below are some examples of questions that can be used when working with diverse partners across the community to better understand priorities, motivations, and perspectives that contribute to notions of value:

Organizational stakeholders	Community members & individuals with lived experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Why did your organization make the decision to participate? ▶ How will you know you're succeeding and/or failing as a collaborative? ▶ What do community members tell you about how the collaborative impacts them? What opportunities do they have to contribute to its planning, implementation and assessment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What do you think your community needs to be healthy and happy? ▶ How well is the collaborative addressing community needs? What is working well and what is not? What do you look for to tell what's working and what is not? ▶ How is the collaborative impacting you and others in your community? Who is benefitting and in what ways?

We will realize the full potential of cross-sector collaboration only when we understand and recognize its multidimensional, context- and perspective-dependent contributions to the people and communities collaborating.

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About the Camden Coalition

We are a multidisciplinary nonprofit working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden, NJ, and across the country. The Camden Coalition works to advance the field of complex care by implementing person-centered programs and piloting new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to health and wellbeing. Supported by a robust data infrastructure, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, our community-based programs deliver better care to the most vulnerable individuals in Camden and regionally.

Through our National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs (National Center), the Camden Coalition works to build the field of complex care by inspiring people to join the complex care community, connecting complex care practitioners with each other, and supporting the field with tools and resources that move the field of complex care forward. The National Center's founding sponsors are the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and AARP.



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