

**REPORT OF THE
NELSON CHAIR ROUNDTABLE
ON NETWORKING
COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS**



**LYNCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
BOSTON COLLEGE**



There is an African proverb that says:

THE WEBS OF MANY SPIDERS CAN TIE DOWN A LION

...through better interfacing of community programs, the array of educational, social and economic problems that besets underserved communities can be tamed under a web of effectively coordinated services.

Anderson J. Franklin, Ph.D.
Roundtable Report (2010)

NELSON CHAIR ROUNDTABLE ON

NETWORKING COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS

Report

Sponsored by:

Office of the Honorable David S. Nelson
Professional Chair

Boston College
Lynch School of Education

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**THIS IS A REPORT BASED ON DISCUSSIONS AND DELIBERATIONS OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE
NELSON CHAIR ROUNDTABLE ON NETWORKING COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS. THE
ROUNDTABLE IS A TWO DAY “THINK TANK” THAT BRINGS TOGETHER A SMALL NUMBER OF
INVITED PROGRAMS TO SHARE COMMON CONCERNS
AND TO ENHANCE PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS**

VISION

Our vision is that the Nelson Chair Roundtable on Networking Community Based Programs will help community programs to become more effective supplementary supports for families, children, and youth by facilitating “program to program mentoring” and greater partnership with other organizations and institutions. Our long-term goal is to create synergy between community programs so that they work in a collaborative network where there will be an organic exchange of best practices toward a common goal of greater equity, opportunities and improved quality of life for underserved populations. We envision that strengthened ties between community based programs will enable them to work in concert to better fulfill their vision and mission as well as to achieve mutual excellence in delivery of services. Our aim is to make the Roundtable a model that is both transportable and generative, whereby community based programs learn to mentor each other and Roundtables are developed by participants at their local level through their leadership. The vision is that germination at the local level will evolve a larger network of effective programs strengthened by their shared commitment to transforming the conditions of underserved youth and families in communities nationwide.

MISSION

The Roundtable’s mission is to bring together effective Community Based Programs that work with underserved populations experiencing disparities in education, health, and employment. In bringing these programs together, the aim is to create and sustain a Roundtable forum for a small number of invited programs, expert consultants, and others who have a shared commitment to improving their effectiveness in fulfilling their mission and work in the community. In recognition of the independence and frequent isolation of these programs from adequate support systems, the Roundtable intends to promote networking, foster program to program mentoring, cultivate mutual resources through the sharing of knowledge and skills, further the development of effective models, enhance understanding of the population and community demographics, and address challenges of implementation, staff development and funding acquisition. Part of the objective is to create the space for these programs to revisit their respective visions and missions and to learn how to utilize an extended network of support with program partners to accomplish this goal. The Roundtable is the source of critical discussion and feedback from other invited program leaders, community and professional advisors, and related resource personnel. The small number of participants is deliberate in order to facilitate an intimate, “think-tank” atmosphere, thereby maximizing interaction and exchange of ideas within a supportive learning environment. By fulfilling this mission the Roundtable will have served to enrich best practices by strengthening ties between community based programs in a manner that enhances their capacity to more effectively address the multitude of challenges facing the populations they serve.

NECESSITY OF THE ROUNDTABLE MODEL

Status of Youth Today

At the heart of the Roundtable is a commitment to transforming the lives of underserved youth in our communities. Researchers and scholars have long established the developmental tasks facing youth as they progress towards adulthood; today's youth, however, are confronted with a host of additional challenges adding to the complexity of their young lives. There has been a steady increase in households with children experiencing housing problems, with 43% of families living in housing that is physically inadequate, crowded, or a significant cost burden (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009). Difficulties in securing and maintaining housing have resulted in an increase in geographic mobility of families that in turn contributes to the dissolution of optimal social cohesion in communities whereby individuals may feel connected and supported (Miller, 2003). While parents may be no less invested in children's emotional, physical, and educational well-being than in years past, the intense economic stress facing many parents today may make it increasingly difficult to attend to their children's needs. Many jobs, particularly those in which low-income parents are employed, often do not provide health benefits, paid leave, or paid vacation. Due to the scarcity of jobs, many low-income parents are compelled to take jobs with nonstandard hours (i.e., nights and weekends), significantly limiting the amount of time they are home with their children (Presser, 2003). As employed parents struggle to work to make ends meet, they often do so at the sacrifice of being physically and emotionally available to their children (Miller, 2003). With the absence of parental involvement, and/or lack of connections to a community of supportive adults, youth are put at risk for increased involvement in unsafe and/or unhealthy behaviors

Indeed, many youth today are involved in high-risk activities. By 12th grade, approximately a quarter of males and females have engaged in heavy alcohol use, and only slightly less have used illicit substances (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009). Almost half of high school students report having had sexual intercourse. Seventeen percent of all crimes involve a juvenile offender (Finklhor & Ormrod, 2000). Rates of teen suicide have increased significantly in recent years, and it is now the third leading cause of death among youth (Centers for Disease Control, 2007).

The Out of School Experience

Children spend less than 20% of their waking hours in school, and schools are open for less than half the days of the year (Children's Defense Fund, 2003). Clearly, children are left with a large proportion of time spent out of school, and how this time is spent may be critical to their development. The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) defines out-of-school time as consisting of "a wide range of program offerings for young people that take place before school, after school, on weekends, and during the summer and other school breaks" (NIOST, 2000, p. 1). Indeed, out of school time has been found to be a source of risk as well as an opportunity for prevention and intervention. The time period immediately following school has been identified as the peak time in which teens commit crimes, are

victims of crime (Fox, 2003), are involved in car accidents (Rice, 2000), and use substances (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2001). Unsupervised teens are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse during after school hours (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Shuster, 2002), and are increasingly more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases and to become adolescent parents. These statistics are particularly concerning given that over 7 million children between the ages of five and 14 regularly care for themselves, without supervision (Smith, 2002), and a majority of children (70%) between the ages of 12 and 17 are not involved in organized activities outside of school (Public Agenda, 1999). Children of families living in poverty are one-third as likely to participate in at least one out-of-school time activity (Smith, 2002), though more than half of low-income parents would prefer to have their children involved in organized activities but are unable to do so due to a variety of barriers that limit their access to programs and services (Miller, O'Connor, Sirignano, & Joshi, 1996).

Community Based Out of School Time Programs

Community based out of school time programs not only keep youth off the streets by providing supervision and structure, they also serve as rich resources to promote learning and positive youth development. While programs differ in structure and implementation, out of school time programs provide a range of services and supports for youth, and in some instances, for their families and communities as well. Given the protective role that families and communities may serve within youth's lives (e.g., Cleveland, Feinberg, Bontempo, & Greenberg, 2008), the growing interest in including these elements within youth programming is becoming more widely recognized (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000). As we consider youth's lives as occurring within multiple contexts such as these, it is also important to understand how out of school time programs, in and of themselves, may serve as a valuable context for child and adolescent development.

Out of school time program participation has been linked to an increase in school attendance, academic achievement, and time dedicated to homework and extracurricular activities (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003). Teenagers who participate in organized after-school activities are significantly more likely to graduate from high school (Hunter, 2001). Further, youth involvement in such programs has been associated with improved conflict management strategies (Vandell & Pierce, 1999), self-image (American Youth Policy Forum, 2003), and social development, as well as reductions in high-risk behaviors. Particularly for individuals in low-income communities, youth programming can serve to reduce the disparity of opportunity existing between low-income youth and their more resourced counterparts. By bridging social capital, (Putnam, 2000) programs offer relational resources that enable links between youth and individuals and/or institutions that would otherwise be difficult to bridge but may be instrumental in helping youth "get ahead" (Quane & Rankin, 2001).

Clearly, out of school time programs are vital contributors to improving youth development, particularly for poor and underserved youth and families. Notably, more than half of teens and low-income parents report a desire for increased afterschool programming in their communities (e.g., Miller, O'Connor,

Sirignano, & Joshi, 1996; YMCA of the USA, 2001). However, not all OST programs are necessarily effective; programs have been criticized for not meeting participants' developmental needs (Kahne et al., 2001), as well as maintaining poor skill development, weak connections to academic materials, not engaging youth capacities, and not fostering long-term relationships between adults and participants (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Kahne & McLaughlin, 1998). Often, programs are not flexible in their structure and implementation, employing a "one-size-fits-all" approach to individuals and communities whose needs are more complex and dynamic. Youth's lives are not fragmented. However, the services and programs traditionally developed to assist youth tend to focus on one sphere of youth's lives, as if these spheres are unrelated to other areas central to growth and development (Brown et al., 1997). This is often a product of the priorities of funders that community based programs must be responsive to. By employing such a narrow approach, many programs' interventions become less relevant or applicable to youth's lives, thus limiting their overall effectiveness.

Bringing Effective Programs Together: The Roundtable

Yet effective, comprehensive community based programs do exist. However, due to limited funding, priorities of the given community, and geographical distance these programs rarely have the opportunity to connect to each other. Seldom do they have an opportunity to self-evaluate and retool in a supportive forum of peers and resource personnel. Each one labors alone, trying very often to address similar issues and to reach similar goals. In a career of traveling around the country by the Nelson Professional Chair visiting and working with community programs, it was apparent how isolated from one another these programs are. There was little mutual exchange of best practices or development of collaborative initiatives. This was when the Roundtable was conceived. The question became how to address programmatic and organizational issues of community based programs working so independently and in isolation from each other. It was believed that if community based programs worked more closely together, their individual missions would more easily be accomplished and the larger issues of their communities more effectively addressed. There is an African proverb that says: "the webs of many spiders tie down the lion;" or in our thinking, through better interfacing of community programs, the array of educational, social and economic problems that besets underserved communities can be tamed under a web of effective coordinated services. Therefore, the model, and the aspiration of the Roundtable, is to create the connectedness and synergy amongst community programs that will lead to their greater collaboration to promote mutual effectiveness.

Still, all of these plans are dependent upon resources. How does a community program get the resources, personnel, supplies and everything else it needs to implement these ideas? In the Roundtable we examine these larger issues of multiple demands inherent to running a community based program. Funding issues are a constant challenge and a growing concern in the current economic climate. There is more competition for money due to the limited amount of funding. When some programs lose money, they try to compensate by stretching limited resources across their array of interventions; other programs restructure their priorities. Whichever the circumstance, programs' capacity for effectiveness is impacted

and their viability as a program threatened. Sustaining, much less institutionalizing effective interventions is problematic with instability of funds. With the increased demands for social services on top of the immense budget limitations, agencies are more than ever in need of creative solutions to more effectively address their consumer's needs and to ensure sustainability as a program (e.g., Curtis, 2002; Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001; as cited in Davoli & Fine, 2004). As opposed to attempting to generate solutions by "recreating the wheel," the Roundtable model instead focuses on where and how the "wheels" are rolling quite well, and capitalizes on open communication and collaboration between effective community organizations. By sharing best practices and brainstorming ways in which to solve problems, community organizations are able to build on one another's strengths while also contributing to the development of a core network of programming knowledge and resources surrounding the shared goal of helping our youth. In doing so, both programs and the broader network, acting in a "program to program" mentoring paradigm, are supported and strengthened, in a manner that is both efficient and cost-effective.

THE ROUNDTABLE MODEL

The Roundtable is a model with three phases that support the development of program to program mentoring promoting sustained networking. Its three phases include the identification of effective programs, participation in a roundtable forum, and sustaining alliances through program mentorship.

Phase 1: Identifying effective programs

Potential participants will be identified through referrals provided by community and professional networks. Site visits will take place to evaluate suitability for participation, as well as interest and commitment. By specifically recruiting *effective* programs into the Roundtable, the model aims to increase the standards of the community programming and promote further growth. Presently we conceptualize effective programs in terms of the principles of effective prevention programs identified by the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Prevention: Promoting Strength, Resilience, and Health in Young People (Nation, Crusto, Wandersman, Kumpfer, Seybolt, Morrissey-Kane, & Davino, 2003), and have adapted these principles for our own use in defining effective programs. This is not a litmus tests for programs as much as a guideline in considering programs and for self study by programs. However, there is a need for continual refinement of the definition and criteria for effective programs as we gain more empirical research in this domain, and thus our current criteria for effective programs is a working definition. Programs are screened according to how well they represent most of these standards as well as the potential to attain them with supports provided by the Roundtable. Our current working criteria for effective community based programs are as follows:

Comprehensive and flexible model

- Intervention is multi-component, both in term of the services provided and the settings and systems incorporated into the intervention. The intervention is flexible in nature and grows with the needs of the population.

Varied teaching methods

- Youth programs need to facilitate insight and awareness in participants, as well as skill-based learning opportunities. Programs must also have the capacity for improvisation and ingenuity to retain students and sustain the longevity of the program.

Sufficient dosage

- The intensity, length, and timing of the intervention must be sufficient to address the actual problems in the community and maintain the effects of the intervention.

Theory driven structure

- Programs must be informed by a theory-based, conceptual model that has a basis in research.

Positive relationships

- Programs provide opportunities for youth to develop and/or strengthen positive relationships with program staff as well as important others in their lives (e.g., parents, peers).

Appropriately timed interventions

- Interventions should aim to address precursors to problems, not just problems that are already full-blown. Further, they should be uniquely tailored to the developmental needs of youth participants.

Socio-culturally relevant

- Programs incorporate the cultural norms of participants and the community within which they are embedded to increase the relevance of the intervention and participants' receptiveness to it.

Outcome evaluation

- In this day and age, anecdotal evidence of program outcomes is not enough. Programs must have documented goals and objectives and engage in a process of evaluation to determine effectiveness in reaching goals.

Well-trained staff

- Program staff are carefully selected and trained, and are regularly supervised and supported throughout their work.

Phase 2: Convening in a Roundtable forum

The Roundtable takes the form of a “think-tank” meeting as opposed to a conference, and therefore is composed of a small number of invited participants. The emphasis is on networking ideas, resources, and shared concerns, and focusing on areas of effectiveness and mutual competency as well as need. It is designed to foster inter-program relationships to create and strengthen alliances. Participants will revisit the origins of their programs, share achievements in implementation, and assess areas of challenge in each strategic criterion area of effectiveness going forward. The Roundtable will aid community programs in brainstorming ideas and offer guidance on utilizing organizational and programmatic consultants, contributing ultimately to the development of action plans to further the programs and strengthen their work.

Phase 3: Sustaining alliances by promoting program mentorship

In a program's first year of participation in the Roundtable, the program is able to utilize peer program leaders, experts, and other supportive resources. Previous Roundtable participants and resource persons serve as mentors. Site visits, conference calls, and regular communication between the program and mentor programs are facilitated and encouraged. As the first year draws to a close, the program is prepared to transition from a mentee role to a mentorship role within the network.

In year two, programs return to the Roundtable as mentors and provide updates to Roundtable participants regarding their program's status and progress on their action plans developed at the prior Roundtable meeting. The programs participate in the orientation of new programs to the network and serve as program mentors to new programs. At the heart of the Roundtable model is collaborative work and exchange of best practices between community programs. This becomes the essence of the generative cycle intrinsic to the Roundtable where programs acquire specific organizational mentoring skills as well as a capacity to build and extend this network paradigm in their community.

THEMES FROM THE 2009 ROUNDTABLE

The following themes emerged from presentations, think-tank sessions and informal brainstorming at the 2009 Roundtable.

Evaluation

Due to the current economic climate, funding cuts have been a major issue facing all programs. As such, there is more pressure than ever to provide program evaluation to empirically document program effectiveness, thus enhancing the likelihood of continued and/or increased financial support from funders.

As programs consider the evaluation process, it is important to recognize that the data generated do not provide information alone. It is the evaluators and the researchers who interpret the data that tell the “stories” of programs and the manner in which they affect change in the lives of participants. Thus, evaluation does not simply rely on the application of statistical principles; it relies on use of a conceptual framework to guide the evaluation process. Evaluators need to find the research context that helps them to tell the full story of the program in a meaningful way that is useful in furthering the effectiveness of the program.

Quantitative Evaluation: Concerns and Recommendations

Traditional research methods in program evaluation tend to focus on pre-intervention and post-intervention outcomes, thereby overlooking key underlying process factors impacting the outcome. In doing so, indirect effects of the intervention are often lost in the evaluation, resulting in a one-dimensional or limited view of a program’s outcomes and effectiveness. It is therefore critical to examine mechanisms such as mediators and moderators within data analysis to foster a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how and why the intervention is associated with particular outcomes.

The impact of programs will likely vary across individuals. Therefore, it is extremely important to consider the individual differences of the population being measured. When groups are measured in aggregate without any controls for individual differences, we can see a low effect size that does not accurately represent the extent of an intervention’s impact. Therefore, there is great value in documenting characteristics of participants and their life circumstances. The greater the information available regarding participants, the better able we are to detect the impact of an intervention, and further, to examine moderators to see if the intervention impacts certain individuals differently than others.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) as an Evaluative Tool

It is also imperative to broaden the vista of program evaluation to include input and/or “knowledges” from program participants, the communities within which they are embedded, and program staff. Participants’ research “input” can consist of actual data as well as information or guidance on how to assess outcome in a way that is contextually-grounded and therefore more relevant. Participatory action

research uses this approach so as to develop evidence-based evaluation “in vivo” or in other words actually live *from* the work being done, as opposed to *on* the work being done.

Building a research team consists of building a common knowledge base with researchers partnering with subjects. In such a team, diversity of knowledge and experience is viewed as an asset to facilitate more comprehensive and relevant assessment. The unit of analysis becomes the individual participants, the program itself, the inter-program relationships, the policy issues, and system change and alliances.

Applying a PAR Approach to Evaluating the Roundtable as an Intervention

Data collection at the individual level may focus on cross-program factors such as participants’ retention, isolation, trust, persistence, and ethnic identity, as well as individual program factors that are more idiosyncratic to the goals of the program, such as crime rates, family functioning, and citizenship. At the program level, factors such as staffing, funding, collaboration with individuals and systems, and “migrateability” (i.e., the ability for a program to exist and be effective in different settings and/or with different populations) may serve as indicators for measurement. Cross-program factors could include shared challenges, goals, and perspectives.

Policy issues are often intertwined with system change and alliances. Within and across programs, partnerships with other systems (i.e., schools, state and federal agencies) are often necessary to further a program’s success, but are rife with complexity. An overarching question faced by programs surrounds what is to be lost and gained by partnerships. Often there is an inherent struggle in finding a way to engage in alliances without being co-opted. Programs need to determine if there are non-negotiable elements of their structure and function that may not be compromised such that “progressive values do not become recessive genes.” Such challenges are nuanced within individual programs, but also exist across all Roundtable programs, and serve as an important unit for ongoing discussion in addition to data analysis.

REVISITING THEMES FROM 2008 ROUNDTABLE

Taking Programs to Scale

Successful programs have both the inclination and external pressure to replicate their model in other places with similar needs. One of the concerns when expanding a program is maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the program so that it expands both “deep” and “wide.” When programs expand to scale, there is a greater need to monitor the application of your model to ensure that it is achieving proper outcomes.

Staffing and Leadership Challenges

Many programs have passionate staff that nevertheless need training to be competent with unique program interventions as well as conventional educational and leadership skills. It is difficult to recruit and maintain staff given the limited resources of community programs. There is also an exodus of leaders from the community program sector and often very few competent and diverse managers take their places. Nor is there a pipeline in place to prepare managers of community-based programs. Low-income communities tend to spawn visionary leaders committed to change. However, their skills do not necessarily include being competent administrators. Many do not have the time to focus on managing organizational effectiveness when building institutional capacity requires fundraising and networking.

Public Policies

It is a challenge to get political commitment for programs from public and private sources. It is important for community-based programs to have government alliances. Decision-makers at state and local levels often have neither the awareness nor the inclination to allocate the funding necessary to install youth-serving systems and sustain preventive interventions.

Integration with Schools

School systems are not alone in having a major impact on children and youth development. Therefore, it is important that Community Based Programs are able to work with schools and share curricula, leadership development, behavioral management strategies, and other effective interventions. There are many challenges for Community Based Programs in working with schools although both engage the same population.

Tracking Outcomes

We need to develop and implement ways to track the progress and success of students during and after our program interventions. Will the new values regarding learning, study skills, or less violence in peer relationships taught in our programs transfer to the real world of youth? Measuring success in Community Based Programs is always a challenge because funding is rarely provided for that task.

Mentoring Challenge

It takes a lot of work and energy to mentor a child. There is a challenge in finding the right people with a strong commitment to this goal and such a screening process is important. We need to think about who the mentors will be and what makes them appropriate to be mentors to the new generation of community leaders.

Teaching Culturally Sensitive Values

Most programs represent explicit values and have value training that is central to their interventions and activities. The values taught in these programs are often different from mainstream educational programs. Values tend to be more culturally diverse, utilizing African heritage, or traditions for character building and leadership development. There is no such thing as a “culturally neutral” program. The need for culturally competent interventions has become a part of the mainstream discourse. Cultural components are the necessary means for grounding values in helping youth through their developmental path.

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