



The Opportunity Youth Forum:

Three Practices for Accelerating Systems Change

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Introduction

This brief explores three practices to help place-based collaboratives accelerate how they change complex systems designed to serve youth. The practices are drawn from interviews with a subset of collaboratives of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions' (FCS) Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). OYF is made up of over 30 collaboratives committed to changing systems to remove the barriers that keep young people from connecting to and persisting in career and education pathways. FCS convenes the Opportunity Youth Forum for the collaboratives, shares best practices, and provides financial and technical resources and assistance.

Equal Measure serves as the learning and evaluation partner of OYF and administers an annual self-assessment survey of the collaboratives measuring their capacities for and engagement in systems change. OYF's Theory of Change (Figure 1, shown below) posits that high-capacity collaboratives will have greater success in influencing systems, advancing the goal of reducing the number of opportunity youth.

Actionable Takeaways

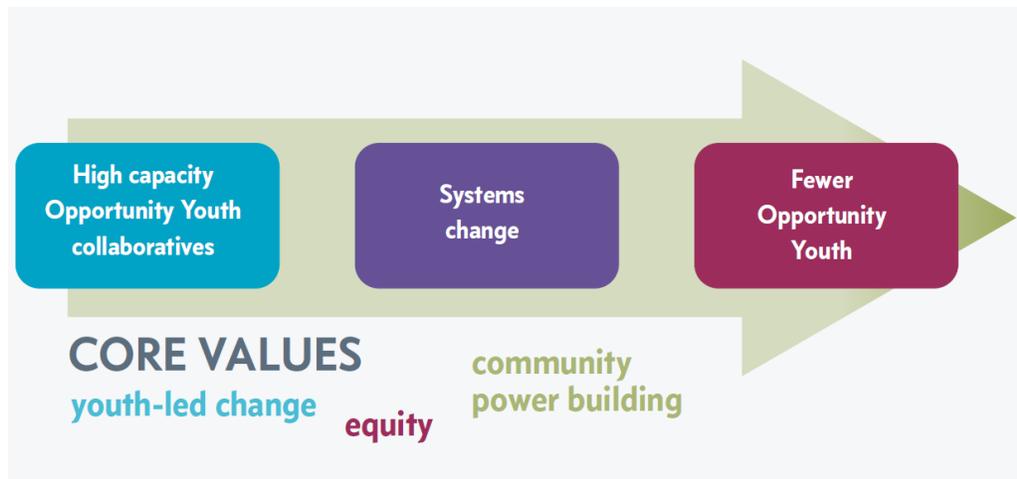
Who can benefit: Place-based collaboratives and funders working to affect systems change

Key Takeaways:

Drawing from our interviews, we identified three practices to help place-based collaboratives accelerate how they change complex education and workforce systems and pathways.

- ❖ **Proactive engagement with local leadership** can cultivate visible and influential champions of the work.
- ❖ **Consistent promotion of work and solutions to key local system actors** can help shift perceptions to establish the value of collaboratives in solving problems.
- ❖ **Aligning goals and strategies, honoring space for diverse perspectives, and giving time for relationships to form** serve as a foundation for systems change work.

Figure 1: OYF Theory of Change





Equal Measure's self-assessment operationalizes systems change across the following seven domains that, when taken together, reflect the conditions to produce equitable outcomes for opportunity youth: program change, narrative change, organizational change, pathway improvement, data use, funding change, and public policy change. Results from the previous two assessments are available here: [2019](#) and [2020](#).

By examining two assessment periods of annual self-assessment data from across the OYF network, we identified collaboratives that showed consistent success across many of these domains. Next, we conducted interviews with a subset of these collaboratives.¹ In these interviews, collaborative leads shared enabling factors - beyond the inherent characteristics of their collaborative - that they identified as accelerating their progress in changing inequitable systems, shifting the conditions that were holding barriers to Opportunity Youth's success in progressing along educational and career pathways.

The three accelerating practices we highlight from these interviews are strategies adoptable by collaboratives regardless of their size or location. We hope these findings help inform FCS' understanding of strategies that can accelerate success for collaboratives and elevate opportunities for continued learning among OYF collaboratives and for the broader field.

Effect of Collaborative Characteristics on Evidence of Systems Change

Our analysis of the 2020 OYF assessment data from across the OYF network showed the greatest evidence of systems change based on:

- ❖ **Size:** Larger collaboratives had greater evidence of systems change than small or mid-sized collaboratives.
- ❖ **Age:** Older collaboratives (based on the backbone organization's age) had greater evidence of systems change than younger or less experienced collaboratives.
- ❖ **Resources:** Collaboratives with larger budgets devoted to OY (over \$500,000 annually) had greater evidence of systems change. Collaboratives with better staffed backbones showed more evidence of organizational change and systems level data use.
- ❖ **Urbanicity:** Urban collaboratives had greater evidence of systems change than rural collaboratives.

These findings underscore the effect of a collaborative's contexts and qualities on its ability to advance systems change. These data do not, however, uncover the promising practices so critical to collaboratives' success. To go beyond these characteristics in our understanding of the factors that lead to success in systems change, we probed for specific practices from a set of collaboratives that demonstrated strong evidence of systems change over two years.

Note: Findings above are statistically significant. For more information, see [Forging a National Network To Advance Equitable Systems Change](#) and [Seizing The Moment to Advance a Movement](#).

¹ We interviewed sites that scored in the top third in systems change on both the 2019 and 2020 self-assessment. Scores are calculated as the percent of survey items (under each of the 7 systems change domains) that sites reported as "well" or "very well" (from a four-point scale). Systems change scores for the four selected sites were: Boston – 76% in 2019 and 58% in 2020; Hartford – 62% in 2019 and 69% in 2020; Bronx – 64% in 2019 and 59% in 2020; and L.A. – 41% in 2019 and 42% in 2020.



Three Practices to Accelerate Systems Change

We conducted interviews with four OYF collaboratives to develop a deeper understanding of specific practices that help accelerate systems change in communities. While these conditions emerged from contexts unique to each collaborative, the lessons from these communities can be more broadly applied across the OYF network and other place-based collaborative efforts. The four collaboratives are:

- ❖ Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative
- ❖ Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative
- ❖ Bronx Opportunity Network
- ❖ Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative

PRACTICE #1: ENGAGE PROACTIVELY WITH LOCAL LEADERSHIP TO ADVANCE COLLABORATIVE GOALS

Essential Practice: Identify visible and influential local champions who can help expedite a collaborative’s systems change initiatives. Find ways to validate the efforts of these champions – either by appointing them to leadership roles or positioning them as local or national thought leaders – to help keep them engaged.

Visible and influential local leaders play a vital role in shaping communities’ focus areas and programs, collaborations and partnerships, and policy work. These leaders may hold a variety of positions including elected officials or governing agency leads, school district chiefs or university presidents, or community organizers or community-based organization leaders. **By identifying and engaging system leaders, collaboratives found powerful allies who help expedite the collaborative’s strategic goals and vision.**

Collaborative leads in Boston recalled the impact of engaging a visible and influential system leader as a champion of the collaborative’s work. Leads relied on the president of Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) to advocate for removing barriers to BIPOC students’ success and leveraging data as a tool in that endeavor. Through the collaborative’s Data for Impact (D4I) work, BHCC sought to understand the impact of interventions on students of color and gather student perception of barriers to success. As part of D4I, BHCC focused on updating definitions of data, discussing data integrity, and convening data sharing meetings with actors from across the system. As one collaborative lead reflected, *“... the data work is not glamorous, but [it is] necessary to make all of the other work move and to really make it be systemic instead of just programmatic.”* Bunker Hill’s president was a key driver of the change efforts, despite competing priorities and the risk to relationships with stakeholders who did not want to change practices.

“We make it safe, I think, for leaders to take risks because they know that they have support.”

The collaborative leads from Boston recalled that the early inclusion of Bunker Hill’s president at Aspen Institute convenings helped inspire her efforts around racial equity and systems change through data-focused strategies. A collaborative lead offered: *“So Bunker Hill’s president attends an Aspen Institute Convening, she gets moved by what the OYF is trying to do. She then comes home, does some hard work*



and then has the opportunity to return to the OYF and move others by sharing Bunker Hill's progress. And then that reinforces coming back and continuing to do it." By identifying and engaging a critical system leader in the work, Boston's collaborative was able to sustain progress through complex initiatives like Data for Impact.

Proactive and strategic system leader engagement is also seen in Hartford's collaborative. Collaborative leads spoke to the importance of continuing to maintain close ties with city leadership to launch new initiatives and to sustain the collaborative's work over time. The collaborative maintains strong relationships with Hartford mayors, ensuring they are "... not just [involved] in a peripheral way, but core and central." Hartford's mayors have chaired and participated in the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative.

PRACTICE #2: PROMOTE SOLUTIONS AND EVIDENCE TO SHIFT PERCEPTIONS

Essential Practice: Position program models as solutions to the challenges that systems actors face to help build the trust and credibility that deeper and persistent systems change work requires.

Systems change efforts can be stymied by deep-seated beliefs held by system actors. **By consistently sharing early wins and proof points of their models and taking advantage of opportunities to work closely with systems actors and provide solutions, collaboratives can shift perceptions of system actors, paving the way to new and deeper partnerships.**

Reflecting on earlier stages of New York City's Bronx

Opportunity Network's (BON) work, collaborative representatives described the challenge of nonprofits "getting a seat at the [local colleges'] table." Despite serving similar populations and often the same students, nonprofits had limited access to university leadership. But this dynamic changed as colleges recognized that these nonprofits understood the barriers that low-income students routinely face as they navigate the higher education system and could provide solutions that that benefit both students and their colleges.

"I think it's across the country. You don't really see these relationships or dynamics between the community colleges and the nonprofit practitioners on the ground supporting the young adults."

As enrollment and persistence rates dropped, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges relied on the support of local nonprofits. Due to the nonprofits' success in supporting low-income students in their attempts to access the higher education system, a BON representative recalled a notable shift where colleges recognized nonprofits as a critical element of the colleges' enrollment strategy. In addition to supporting enrollment, the nonprofits' student-centered support of low-income students while enrolled in college also boosted persistence. Nonprofits were not considered, as BON representatives described, an "extra piece." Rather, the nonprofits' expertise in developing relationships with students and working with and supporting all students through college was recognized as an asset. Over time, the relationship between the colleges and the BON became more *proactive*, with routine



meetings set up in advance, rather than *reactive*, waiting for a challenge to emerge before coming together.

By working collaboratively with colleges to support enrollment and persistence, nonprofits in the BON opened the door for deeper collaboration and strategic partnership. The BON has been invited to join the Bronx Transfer Affinity Group – a collaborative of local community colleges – and is the only participant that is not a local university. These trusted relationships have also manifested into data sharing agreements between the colleges and nonprofits. The colleges and nonprofit staff are able to share real-time data on student progress, including grades, attendance, and progress towards degree. Collaborative representatives shared a story of a university’s leadership meeting with nonprofits to review recent graduation data and discuss strategies for improvement.

"... each time we expanded, we said, 'Well, this is what we're doing with the other college. Can we do that with you all?' And we have the model for that."

Collaborative representatives discussed strategies for building buy-in among college presidents. They actively share lessons learned with the field by authoring reports and hosting events. They also leveraged established relationships with colleges to forge new relationships with other colleges. Recalled one representative, *"... it's becoming a little bit easier for us to change perspectives because we have solutions that are working. We've shown people the light."*

PRACTICE #3: BUILD COHESION AMONG GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

Essential Practice: Aligning goals and strategies, honoring space for diverse perspectives, and giving time for relationships to form can build effective partnerships to serve as the foundation for collaborative's systems change work.

Convening practices that aligned strategies and brought a range of perspectives and expertise to the table were cited by the collaboratives as effective tools for building strong and trusted partnerships ready to advance systemic change. They often surfaced partnership and community needs and strengths that might not have emerged otherwise.

Collaborative leads in Hartford observed that most cities, at any point in time, have a multitude of initiatives. These initiatives may vary by focus area and partner type and may be connected to different funders or brands. However well-intentioned, these competing initiatives run the risk of being redundant at best and counterproductive, at worst. Hartford has made a concerted effort to align the various initiatives through one city-wide meeting that prioritizes the local career pathways system. One lead reflected, *"... we have a structure that supports a collective group of organizations to focus on this process that we're going through."*

"I think part of the [value of] everybody in one collective action model and touching base with these different efforts regularly is that you identify opportunities for leveraging what others are doing."



The effort to maintain coordination has helped the collaborative adapt to emerging needs of young people, including mental health services and holistic student support during the pandemic, as well as highlighting the value of the collaborative's data to answer questions across multiple initiatives and audiences.

Leads in Los Angeles credited their "co-convening model" as a contributing factor to the collaborative's success. The model featured leadership shared among different organizations. Strategic selection of partners in co-convening allowed the collaborative to bring to the table a broad set of expertise and deep knowledge of specific systems and sectors, diverse focus areas, and close relationships with young people and familiarity with their needs. Reflecting on the experience, one lead offered, "*... the co-convening model has allowed for us to have expertise across systems and to collaborate and translate across systems because of the expertise of each of the co-conveners.*"

Time, Trust, and Relationships

Successful collaborative partnerships take both time and intention to develop. While the elements of time and trust are not strategies to *accelerate* systems change, but rather are foundational to building the relationships needed for systems change, we heard consistently that those elements are essential to the journey and need support and resources to flourish.

As representatives from BON reflected, "*... partnerships move at the speed of trust. ... trust is built over time, and that can be over years.*" Each collaborative named 'trust' as a foundational element of its work. While this sentiment may feel trite, trust remains a foundational precursor to systems change work and can't be rushed. Investing time to develop trusted relationships has proved to be an effective strategy in helping collaborative partners meet their goals. The notion of long-term trust building may also explain the strong association between the length of time a backbone organization had been established and evidence of achieving systems change.

Trusted relationships strengthen partners' ability to collaborate during times of uncertainty. In Hartford, the long history of collaborative partners working together facilitated the sharing of resources and strategies during the pandemic. Leads from Boston reflected that the collaborative's sharing and use of data was made possible by developing long-standing and trusted relationships. Partners in Boston understood and trusted that their data would not be used punitively or be published without their consent, thus clearing the path for more meaningful data engagement and collaboration.

Trusted relationships also facilitate mindset shifts among system actors. Representatives from BON described mindset shifts that college partners in their system made over time that facilitated deeper partnerships with nonprofits. College partners began to see that they could work collaboratively with nonprofit partners to improve the system for student populations. A BON representative noted, "*Sometimes these conversations can happen for a year, two years, three years before we really start seeing mind shift change.*"



Looking Ahead

Since its founding, the OYF has continuously evolved to meet the needs of partners and the young people it reaches. From diversifying and growing the network to adapting to changing contexts (including the Covid-19 pandemic), the network has committed to learning from and sharing leading practices among collaboratives.

The interviews referenced in this brief offer insights into practices that collaborative cite as contributing to and accelerating their systems change success. While the strategies they engaged took place within the specific contexts of their communities, we hope that highlighting the value of these three accelerating practices can be helpful to all communities working collectively to change systems and institutions, and to the funders supporting this work.