

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

*Informing and inspiring leaders of social change*

## NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

# Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 3

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work.

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*The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) and the nonprofit consulting firm FSG have partnered to understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts. The third in a four-part series, this blog post shares highlights from our evaluation findings. In our first two posts, we defined the roles of backbone organizations in collective impact, laid out the parameters for this evaluation, and shared what we have learned thus far about specific value-added activities that backbone organizations share in common across sectors.*

### Results of Inquiry: What We Learned

The evaluation of six Cincinnati area backbone organizations was designed to answer the following questions:

- How and to what extent are backbone organizations **effective catalysts** for achieving community-level progress?
- How and to what extent do backbone organizations **contribute** to improved social outcomes?
- How is **success** best measured for backbone organizations?

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### Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 1 | 2

### Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 2

### Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 3

### Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 4 | 4

- What **common challenges and best practices** can be shared across backbone organizations?

As we described in the [previous post](#), we defined the key activities of backbone support as: guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding.

With our common activities and outcomes for the backbone organizations in hand, FSG set out to collect the data to answer these questions. We heard many valuable perspectives on the backbone organizations' work from partners, funders, advisors, and community members.

1. **Their value is unmistakable.** If not for the backbone organizations' contributions, stakeholders believe that "even more decisions in our community would be made by a small group of folks," "communities would be simply in survival mode," "the public wouldn't have near the understanding of the challenges," and "there wouldn't be any coordinated program at all." As one stakeholder said, "If they weren't asking the right questions, we wouldn't be [where we are today.]" In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support. These representative comments help the backbones articulate their value and purpose to stakeholders.
2. **GCF's backbone cohort shares strengths in *guiding vision and strategy* and *supporting aligned activities*.** All six backbone organizations received the highest marks for their effectiveness in these core areas. Interviewees said: "Prior to the establishment of [the backbone organization], our community lacked a collective direction for our region," and "[the backbone organizations] bring a lot of people together; they are out understanding what activities are going on and how to align them." The backbone leaders have been attentive to delivering value to their partners in these areas and are likely to continue to do so to maintain momentum. Furthermore, **some backbones were also recognized for *mobilizing funding***, as exemplified through their success winning a Social Innovation Fund grant and other national funding opportunities.
3. **Backbone organizations shift focus over time.** By and large, this cohort of six backbone organizations has not yet placed a great deal of emphasis on *building public will* or *advancing policy*, but all expect to increase their time allocations and capacity in these areas in the future. Backbone organization leaders and their stakeholders alike feel that there is a natural progression from *guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities*, and *establishing shared measurement practices*—all "inner circle," partnership-

focused activities—to gradually building toward broader externally-focused, community-level activities. For many, attention is beginning to shift to incorporating more external-facing activities into their work.

4. **Backbone organizations’ partners need ongoing assistance with data.** Although *establishing shared measurement practices* was seen broadly as a strength of many of the backbone organizations, building partners’ capacity to contribute and use data in a shared measurement system is a common area for improvement. As one partner described, “We do not have enough manpower to input data.” Backbones with limited staff capacity found it particularly challenging to consider taking on a greater technical assistance role in this area.
5. **External communications, *building public will*, and *advancing policy* are common backbone challenges.** We heard many stakeholders encourage the backbone organizations to improve communications about their own value and progress on the initiative. For example, we heard that “people don’t know what is being accomplished,” and “it’s hard to know how much progress they are making against their goals.” This mirrors the challenge we mentioned in [part 1](#) around articulating the backbone organizations’ value. In addition, stakeholders spoke of the need to build a more intentional strategy around public will and advocacy: “Even if there is not a lot of money available, to shape the public mind as to what the issues are is terribly important.” Most of the backbone organizations recognized that these areas needed additional attention and capacity, though they were also reluctant to place too much emphasis on advocacy without a clear opportunity to advance policy in a specific, targeted area.

While evaluation findings revealed many commonalities across backbone organizations, there were also several organization-specific challenges. For example, one organization has been pulled in too many directions and is now likely spread too thin to be very effective in all areas. Another needs to enlist more partners representing a broader cross-section of the region in order to effectively tackle the scope of the initiative. As GCF and the backbone leaders considered the relative importance of the messages emerging from the data, we started to identify the contextual nuances that can affect backbone performance, such as:

- The **phase** of the **collective impact** initiative (for example, whether the backbone is helping to initiate action, organize for impact, or sustain action and impact)
- The **capacity** of the backbone organization (for example, headcount, areas of expertise, financial resources)

- The **geographic reach and scope** of the collective impact effort (for example, one neighborhood versus a three-state region, early childhood learning versus community development)
- **Structural** opportunities and constraints created by a parent organization (for example, independent **nonprofit** versus program underneath a local chapter of a national network of organizations)

For many backbone organizations, the evaluation findings confirmed and clarified what they instinctively knew already about their work. FSG's independent work had the additional benefit of providing a vehicle and forum for sharing the backbone organizations' stories, raising awareness about common issues, and generating learning opportunities. The findings from our baseline assessment launched us into our hoped-for **community of practice**, and a new set of opportunities for learning and technical assistance over the coming months.

*We'll share our plans for next steps in tomorrow's post.*



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### Tags

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