

# Utilizing Collaboration Theory to Evaluate Strategic Alliances

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## ABSTRACT

Increasingly, *collaboration* between business, non-profit, health and educational agencies is being championed as a powerful strategy to achieve a vision otherwise not possible when independent entities work alone. But the definition of collaboration is elusive and it is often difficult for organizations to put collaboration into practice and assess it with certainty. Program evaluators can assist practitioners concerned with the development of a strategic alliance predicated on collaboration by understanding and utilizing principles of collaboration theory. The Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (SAFAR) is an assessment tool that captures central principles of collaboration and has been used as part of a four-step evaluation process to help alliance leaders, managers, and members in Safe School/Healthy Student Initiatives to quantitatively and qualitatively gauge, celebrate, and communicate the relative strength of their collaborative endeavor over time. The collaboration principles and corresponding assessment processes described in this article can be used by evaluators of large- or small-scale initiatives that seek to capitalize on the synergistic power of the “collaborative effort.”

An increasing number of organizations are coming together to address complex societal issues. Most intentional, inter-organizational collaboratives (i.e., strategic alliances) articulate the *collaborative effort* as the primary method for achieving ideal short and/or long-term goals that would not otherwise be attainable as entities working independently. For example, school violence is one of the most pressing and complex concerns that our communities face today. Research suggests that school violence prevention, intervention, and response are most effective when a web of community organizations come together in creative and collaborative ways (Dryfoos, 1998; RTI, 2003). Recognizing the need for shared organizational efforts to address school safety, the federal Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice launched an unprecedented joint endeavor called the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HSI), a competitive demonstration grant in existence since 1999, which promotes

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comprehensive, integrated, community-wide strategies that foster school safety and healthy youth development.

In fiscal year 1999, the US Congress appropriated 40 million dollars to fund violence prevention efforts in schools through the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative. During the first two years of the program, grants, of 1–3 million dollars were awarded to 77 local school districts that have formal partnerships with local mental health and law enforcement agencies; combined awards totaled over 144 million dollars. In fiscal year 2002, over 80 million dollars were awarded to over 45 school districts nationwide. The SS/HSI is based on evidence that an *integrated community-wide and collaborative approach* is the most effective way to promote healthy childhood development and to address the problems of school violence and alcohol and other drug abuse. Collaboration is increasingly considered the means by which student, school, and community level outcomes will be obtained.

Local SS/HS initiatives, such as the Larimer County Interagency Network for Kids (LINK) in Colorado, which was funded in 1999, and Project PASS (Progress By Advancing Students and Schools) in Vermont funded in 2002, expect to build on an existing educational infrastructure that links mental health, law enforcement, social services and other non-profit agencies throughout the community to create a more collaborative delivery of services to children and families (Gajda, 2001). The SS/HSI, and arguably most other human service, mental health, juvenile justice, and educational partnerships across the nation seeking to address school violence or any number of other complex problems, recognize that the strength of the strategic alliance and its “collaborativeness” is the foundation on which any chance of successfully reaching project goals is predicated. In addition, each of these initiatives expects to see evidence of *increased collaboration* as a long-term outcome and have articulated this as an outcome in their respective evaluation plans. In other words, collaboration has become both the vehicle for obtaining student and school level outcomes and a long term outcome in and of itself.

However, “collaboration” is a hard term to grasp. Although collaboration has the capacity to empower and connect fragmented systems for the purposes of addressing multifaceted social concerns, its definition is somewhat elusive, inconsistent, and theoretical. In its overuse, the term “collaboration” has become a catchall to signify just about any type of inter-organizational or inter-personal relationship, making it difficult for those seeking to collaborate to put into practice or evaluate with certainty. In my experience as a program evaluator, most practitioners working to form strategic alliances are not sure about what collaboration looks and feels like. They are not sure if their collective actions constitute true collaboration and they do not know how to determine if the structural, procedural, and interpersonal relationships between the partners are as healthy as they could be.

## THE ROLE OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

The development and assessment of intentional, inter-organizational collaboratives (strategic alliances) can be greatly enhanced by utilizing collaboration theory. Program evaluators can use collaboration theory to demystify the meanings of collaboration, to describe and assess levels of collaborative integration, and to engage stakeholders in a dialogical process of formative evaluation. A formative evaluation process focused on the development of collaboration will generate powerful information for use by alliance leaders, members, and stakeholders to make informed decisions about the goals, strategies, and structures most appropriate for their strategic alliance. In addition, the on-going formative evaluation of strategic alliances allows project

members to capture and understand (both quantitatively and qualitatively) growth in collaboration over time. In effect, utilization of collaboration theory in conjunction with formative assessment allows collaboration to be understood as an intervention and as an outcome.

For those invested in the vitality, productivity, and effectiveness of any given strategic alliance predicated upon collaboration, the question becomes: What is collaboration and how do we assess it? For many initiatives, the questions of relevance to the program's evaluation are:

1. How do we determine if partnerships have been strengthened or if new linkages have been formed as a result of this strategic alliance?
2. How do we describe a "community-wide infrastructure" and how can we measure and/or characterize its development over time?
3. What does it mean to "link" agencies?
4. Is our strategic alliance becoming increasingly seamless or collaborative over time?
5. What level or breadth of collaboration is needed to achieve particular outcomes?
6. What is the point at which efforts to increase collaboration are simply a waste of resources, without increasing desired outcomes?

As program evaluators of strategic alliances, it is our responsibility to execute evaluations that include measures and methods that address the relative health of a collaborative effort, not just capture, analyze, and report the attainment of more concrete short-term objectives, interim performance indicators, and long-term outcomes. Collaboration theory is comprised of the acceptable general principles and abstractions that have been generated by observing the phenomenon of multiple individuals or entities working together to develop a strategic alliance. The literature makes clear that there are indeed observed facts about the development of strategic alliances for which principles of collaboration can be derived.

### **Principle 1: Collaboration is an Imperative**

According to [Frances Hesselbein of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation](#) and [John C. Whitehead of the Harvard Business school](#),

We live in a time when no organization can succeed on its own . . . As we look around us in a new century, we realize that businesses and non-profits in today's interconnected world will neither thrive nor survive with visions confined within the walls of their own organizations. They need to look beyond the walls and find partners who can help achieve greater results and build the vital communities to meet challenges ahead (forward, 2000).

According to this perspective, there is an ever increasing need for individuals, educational authorities, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, community networks, and business groups to come together to address the complex issues that confront our society today. Significant community issues, such as youth violence or drug and alcohol abuse, typically have multiple and intertwined causes and effects and may be confounded by dwindling resources, social fragmentation, disengaged citizens, or sweeping political or economic changes. To mitigate and address these factors, community members and organizations are being called upon to mobilize effective collaborative efforts. By working together, individual entities can pool scarce resources and duplication of services can be minimized in order to achieve a vision that would not otherwise be possible to obtain as separate actors working independently. It is through strategic alliances predicated on collaboration that inter-agency dialogue can take place, resources can be shared or centralized, common interventions can be developed, and

resources can be sustained (Austin, 2000; Calabrese, 2000; Chalker, 1999; Hogue et al., 1995; Taylor-Powell, Rossing, & Geran, 1998).

## **Principle 2: Collaboration is Known by Many Names**

*Strategic alliances* are intentional, inter-organizational collaboratives created to benefit the partners and ultimately the stakeholders that they serve (Austin, 2000; Bailey & Koney, 2000); but collaboration is known by many names. A look into the Merriam-Webster, Webster's New World Dictionary, or Microsoft office's thesaurus reveals a whole host of definitions offered for the term collaboration. Its meaning is described as "working together," "a joint venture," "working jointly with others," "joining forces," "working in partnership," "pooling resources," "acting as a team," and "cooperating with one another." Collaboration appears to signify just about any relationship between two entities, whether it is between two people to host a bake sale, five multinational corporations that seek to combine into a single organizational unit, or three high schools who look to make schools safer. The terminology used to describe collaboration is extensive. These terms include: joint ventures, consolidations, networks, partnerships, coalitions, collaboratives, alliances, consortiums, associations, conglomerates, councils, task forces, and groups. And this list is not exhaustive. But it is exhausting to practitioners and personnel who seek to collaborate, who have it written into their strategic plan that they will become more collaborative, and who seek to assess the extent to which they are working well together. As such, strategic alliance representatives must come to a collective and shared understanding of the nature of collaboration and be able to recognize its variations and complexities. Program evaluators can go a long way in helping to clear up the confusion around collaboration by presenting it as a theory of how multiple individuals or entities work together to develop a relationship and by reinforcing that collaboration is complex and can represent a multitude of intra- and inter-organizational alliances.

## **Principle 3: Collaboration is a Journey Not a Destination**

Literature on strategic alliance development strongly supports the notion that there are varying degrees and types of linkages that develop between agencies that seek to work together in some capacity. Most collaboration theorists contend that collaborative efforts fall across a continuum of low to high integration. The level of integration is determined by the intensity of the alliance's process, structure, and purpose. For example, a network or round table is low on the relationship integration continuum because its process and structure is limited to communicating information and exploring interests. Toward the other end of the spectrum, a partnership/consortium/coalition is considered to be of moderately high integration because its primary purpose is to cooperate, which suggests that the group plans together to achieve mutual goals while maintaining separate identities. Other forms that collaborative efforts take are support groups (low integration), and task forces/councils/alliances (medium integration).

Peterson (1991) postulates that there is a three point continuum of interaction for strategic alliances and suggests that this continuum begins with (1) cooperation, whereby fully independent groups share information that supports each others organizational outcomes, to (2) coordination, whereby independent parties align activities or co-sponsor events or services that support mutually beneficial goals, to (3) collaboration, where individual entities give up some degree of independence in an effort to realize a shared goal. Hogue (1993) characterizes five levels of "linkage," which can be used to define existing or potential collaborative

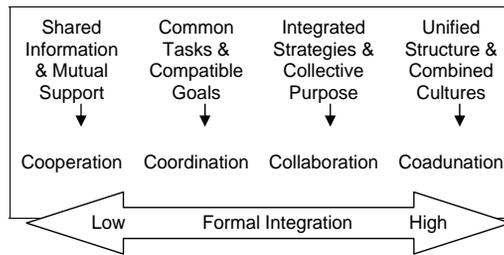


Figure 1. Defining strategic alliances across a continuum of integration.

relationships. Her continuum, *Community Linkages—Choice and Decisions*, identifies the five levels as networking, cooperation/alliance, coordination/partnership, coalition, and collaboration. Linkages at each level are distinguished by their purpose for coming into existence, their structure for organization, and process for making decisions. “Collaboration” is identified as the most highly developed level of integration point on the continuum.

Bailey and Koney (2000) extend Peterson’s and Hogue’s work and make the case for coadunation as the farthest point on the integration or linkage continuum, which implies the complete relinquishment of autonomy of at least one partnering entity in an effort to strengthen a surviving organization. Figure 1 is an adaptation of figures from Bailey and Koney (2000) and visually captures the prevailing consensus that collaboration is a journey, not a destination.

#### Principle 4: With Collaboration, the Personal is as Important as the Procedural

Without a basis for trust and healthy inter-personal connections between people, strategic alliances will not have a solid foundation on which to stand. According to Bailey and Koney (2000), “Although strategic alliance research focuses on organizations, the implementation of inter-organizational efforts has as much to do with individual relationships. For this reason, it is important to emphasize the human . . . elements of the process” (p. 29). Collaboration depends upon positive personal relations and effective emotional connections between partners. Trust is developed between partners only when there is time, effort, and energy put into the development of an accessible and functioning system for communication. Interpersonal conflict needs to be recognized as normal and even expected as the level of integration and personal involvement increases. Program evaluators can articulate for program personnel and practitioners that alliances are most successful when individual members connect on a personal and emotional level with one another. Ultimately, as Austin (2000) makes clear, “alliances are successful when key individuals connect personally and emotionally with the alliance’s social purpose and with one another” (p. 173). Intra- and inter-personal needs of individuals have to be addressed if alliances are going to successfully perform.

#### Principle 5: Collaboration Develops in Stages

The literature on organizational change describes the development of a strategic alliance as a process whereby entities “form, storm, norm and perform” as collaborative entities (Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman’s model became well known for its four-stage sequence, and in 1977 a fifth stage of “adjourn” was added (see Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). More recently, the stages of strategic alliance development have been described as “assemble, order, perform, and

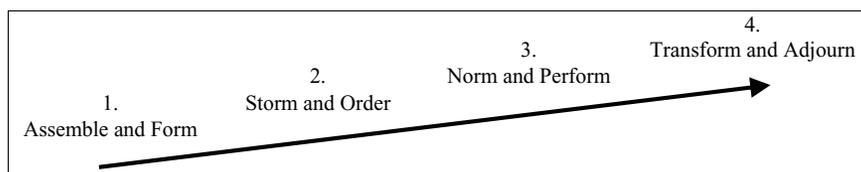


Figure 2. Stages of collaboration development.

transform” (Bailey & Koney, 2000). The stages of collaboration development are depicted in Figure 2.

Program evaluators often find themselves in the position of alliance formation facilitator. In this stage, questions are asked about the value of coming together to take on a joint venture and an initial vision and mission is discussed. The second developmental phase of an alliance, ordering, can be characterized as interpersonally intense. It is in this phase that “storming” happens. Each alliance member seeks to establish his/her own role in the initiative and the norms and strategies of the collaborative effort are determined. The project evaluator can help members determine reasonable and measurable goals, objectives, indicators, and outcomes. Once alliances have developed a mission and corresponding strategic plan, their systems for communication, forms of leadership and their decision-making structures they move into the performance stage.

In the third stage, alliance members have reached working norms and spend their energy on performing the initiative rather than planning for its implementation. Ideally, the project evaluator may find herself in the position of working with alliance leaders, managers, and members to gather formative and process data to be interjected into the continuous feedback cycle. In the fourth stage of alliance development, transformation, group members work with the evaluation and assessment findings and data to formally re-assess and determine what modifications might need to be made to the strategies, tasks, leadership, and communication structures of the alliance. The stages of strategic alliance development are considered by some (Rickards & Moger, 2000) to be somewhat idealistic, but it is generally accepted that at the core of a four or five stage alliance development model is the accepted principle that *groups will pass through predictable stages prior to effective performance*. According to Bailey and Koney (2000), “Alliances yield the greatest impact from evaluation if it [is] used to provide continuous assessment of the alliances process and content throughout all phases of development” (p. 47).

### USING THE PRINCIPLES FOR THE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

As program evaluators it is often our responsibility and prerogative to assist strategic alliance members gauge the relative strength of the alliance and to assess the collaborative process through which it seeks to obtain its short- and long-term goals and outcomes. In the previous section I have synthesized five guiding principles of collaboration: (1) collaboration is an imperative, (2) collaboration is known by many names, (3) collaboration is journey and not a destination, (4) with collaboration the personal is as important as the procedural, and (5) collaboration develops in stages. These five principles provide the theoretical underpinning for the Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (SAFAR) found in Figure 3. The SAFAR represents multiple levels of integration and their varying purposes, strategies/tasks,

Level of Integration	Purpose	Strategies and Tasks	Leadership and Decision-Making	Interpersonal and Communication
1 Networking	Create a web of communication	Loose or no structure	Non-hierarchical	Very little interpersonal conflict
	Identify and create a base of support	Flexible, roles not-defined	Flexible	Communication among all members infrequent or absent
	Explore interests	Few if any defined tasks	Minimal or no group decision making	
2 Cooperating	Work together to ensure tasks are done	Member links are advisory	Non-hierarchical, decisions tend to be low stakes	Some degree of personal commitment and investment
	Leverage or raise money	Minimal structure	Facilitative leaders, usually voluntary	Minimal interpersonal conflict
	Identify mutual needs, but maintain separate identities	Some strategies and tasks identified	Several people form "go-to" hub	Communication among members clear, but may be informal
3 Partnering	Share resources to address common issues	Strategies and tasks are developed and maintained	Autonomous leadership	Some interpersonal conflict
	Organizations remain autonomous but support something new	Central body of people	Alliance members share equally in the decision making	Communication system and formal information channels developed
	To reach mutual goals together	Central body of people have specific tasks	Decision making mechanism are in place	Evidence of problem solving and productivity
4 Merging	Merge resources to create or support something new	Formal structure to support strategies and tasks is apparent	Strong, visible leadership	High degree of commitment and investment
	Extract money from existing systems/members	Specific and complex strategies and tasks identified	Sharing and delegation of roles and responsibilities	Possibility of interpersonal conflict high
	Commitment for a long period of time to achieve short and long-term outcomes	Committees and sub-committees formed  High	Leadership capitalizes upon diversity and organizational strengths	Communication is clear, frequent and prioritized  degree of problem solving and productivity
5 Unifying	Unification or acquisition to form a single structure	Highly formal, legally complex	Central, typically hierarchical leadership	Possibility of interpersonal conflict very high
	Relinquishment of autonomy to support surviving organization	Permanent re-organization of strategies and tasks	Leadership capitalizes upon diversity and organizational strengths	Communication is clear, frequent, prioritized, formal and informal

Figure 3. Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (SAFAR).

leadership/decision-making, and inter-personal and communication characteristics that are described extensively in the literature on strategic alliance development. The Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric is an assessment tool that can be utilized by program evaluators to evaluate collaboration and can be used in each stage of alliance development as part of a comprehensive evaluation plan that includes the assessment of collaboration over time. This SAFAR has been used extensively within a four-step evaluation process to gauge the relative health of Safe Schools/Health Students alliances that seek to capitalize on the power of collaboration. These four steps are now described.

### **Step 1—Convene Alliance Leadership for Focus Group Interview**

Discussion is considered to be one of the most powerful and effective strategies for promoting critical thought, encouraging reflective analysis, and generating a sense of collaboration (Fernandez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994; Garmston & Wellman, 1988). Therefore, when used as a part of a strategic alliance evaluation process, the focus group interview serves two purposes, (1) to promote collaboration and (2) to capture perspectives on collaboration. The person or people concerned with evaluation of the alliance must identify all of the key players in the project and their primary organizational assignments and responsibilities. As early as possible in the project, preferably in the form or assemble stage, the leadership body that represents all identified partners in the initiative are brought together to talk about their vision for the collaborative effort.

From the projects that I have been involved with, this group is made up of the management team (typically 4–7 people) and 3 to 4 other individuals who represent sub-contractors and other community agencies outside the immediate original communication loop. For Project LINK, the 5.8 million dollar Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative in Colorado, the focus group included the Project Director, Director of Pupil Services, Director of Crisis Response, Drug and Alcohol Prevention Team Leader, Nurse Home Visitation Liaison and the Coordinator of the Team of Mental Health Specialists. Once gathered together, the interagency group of representatives engages in a dialogue intended to bring forth perceptions about collaboration and the purpose, strategies/tasks, leadership/decision-making, and interpersonal dynamics/communication of their proposed alliance.

As a result of engaging in the group discussion, members gain a clearer picture of all of the people and agencies involved with the formation and delivery of the collaborative effort.

Participants in this stage have reported that the interview has helped them to define collaboration, recognize that their part in the initiative is much more than “just showing up for meetings,” and understand the expectations of the other partners. Further, the discussion causes them to “get excited” about working with others who are equally committed to making a real and positive difference in the community. It has also been the case that, as a result of the group sharing process, potential partners decide not to participate further in the alliance development and have expressed appreciation of being able to decline participation earlier rather than after having committed resources.<sup>1</sup>

### **Step 2—Assess Baseline and Projected Levels of Integration**

Shortly after an alliance forms and has entered the ordering phase, representatives from all of the project’s key agencies and entities (identified by participants during the focus group interview in Step 1) are invited to a workshop. This workshop is often the first time all parties engaged in the collaborative effort gather together as a group. The purposes of the meeting are to begin building relationships between project leaders, managers, and practitioners, to set the context of collaboration, and to collect baseline quantitative and qualitative data to be used for formative evaluation purposes. For Project LINK, attendees at this meeting included the organizational leaders and members of every entity that had chosen and had been hired to partake in the development of the safe schools initiative. Roughly 35 people attended this meeting, representing seven different organizational entities.

To set the context in Step 2, I have presented the Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric (Fig. 3) so that alliance partners are oriented to the multiple levels of integration

and corresponding characteristics. Participants learn that collaboration has many meanings, which are sometimes in conflict with one another. They also learn that linkages and relationships are defined by their purpose, strategies/tasks, leadership/decision-making, and interpersonal/communication characteristics.

Participants in this step are asked to come to consensus on current and projected levels of integration. The evaluator asks alliance representatives to assess their current level of integration and to speculate on their desired level of integration. They are prompted to brainstorm both *intra-* and *inter-organizationally*. Current level of integration, projected/desired long term

CURRENT/BASELINE and PROJECTED/DESIRED LEVELS OF INTEGRATION 1-5	School District Drug/Alcohol Prevention Team		School Resource Officer Team		Community Mental Health Agency		City Police Department		Community Resource Center		University Social Work Department		Visiting Nurse Association	
	Date:													
School District Drug/Alcohol Prevention Team														
School Resource Officer Team														
Community Mental Health Agency														
City Police Department														
Community Resource Center														
University Social Work Department														
Visiting Nurse Association														
AVERAGE CURRENT/BASELINE AND AVERAGE PROJECTED/DESIRED LEVEL OF INTEGRATION BY GROUP/AGENCY														
AVERAGE CURRENT/BASELINE LEVEL OF INTEGRATION ACROSS THE ALLIANCE							AVERAGE PROJECTED/IDEAL LEVEL OF INTEGRATION ACROSS THE ALLIANCE							

Figure 4. Strategic Alliance Formative Assessment Rubric—recording spreadsheet.

level of integration within their own agency and between their agency and all the other partners are recorded on a spreadsheet such as the SAFAR recording spreadsheet found in Figure 4.

After current and projected (baseline and ideal) levels of integration are recorded, participants are then asked to describe the organizational and procedural steps they anticipate needing to take in order to move toward their ideal level of integration. In Step 2 all participants are asked to discuss: (1) *what it would look like if they reached their ideal level of integration*, (2) *what actions they need and want to take to bring about their ideal level of integration*, and (3) *the evidence that would indicate that they have reached their ideal level of integration*. Descriptions of the ideal levels of integration, the planned actions to bring about ideal levels of integration and a list of evidence that would indicate achievement of their ideal levels of integration must be recorded and collected.

Step 2 requires a substantial amount of time and space for project partners to meet and engage in thoughtful and thorough discussion with one another. In Step 2, the program evaluator can use the SAFAR, recording spreadsheet, and discussion prompts to encourage alliance members to express levels of integration both quantitatively and qualitatively, to collect comprehensive baseline data about collaboration, and to clear up alliance-wide misconceptions and confusion about the meaning of collaboration. Agency partners have reported that this step is of profound importance. Participants have shared an enormous sense of satisfaction at being given the opportunity to engage in meaningful and focused discussion with alliance members about the purpose, leadership and inter-personnel characteristics of their collaborative efforts. In addition, they express that the intra- and inter-agency discussion provides the foundation for lasting relationships between partners throughout the life of the initiative. Participants have appreciated the clarity of the SAFAR and express a sense of relief at being able to get a more concrete understanding the purpose, strategies/tasks, leadership/decision-making, and interpersonal/communication characteristics of their own strategic alliance.

As a result of Step 2, individual entities have come to realize that high levels of collaboration might not be needed to increase student achievement, reduce youth violence, or other identified outcomes. In Project LINK, we learned that although it “sounded politically correct” to form a collaborative, it turned out that several of the partners believed goals could be achieved with well developed cooperation or partnering. This realization was a relief because it meant resources that would have been targeted for building the structure to support higher levels of integration could be utilized for other purposes.

### **Step 3—Collaboration Baseline Data Report**

Current (baseline) and projected (desired) levels of integration data collected at the workshop described in Step 2 are aggregated and a report is generated and shared with every participant in the workshop. The Collaboration Baseline Data Report should identify the current level of integration between each organizational unit that is part of the initiative and should offer a baseline composite mean for the level of integration across the entire collaborative (average of all intra- and inter-project linkages). The report should synthesize, aggregate, and average the quantitative data, and report out on the plans intra- and inter-organizational entities have made to move toward their desired level of integration. In addition, this report should summarize the evidence that each organization expects to collect to determine whether they have reached their desired level of integration.

The Collaboration Baseline Data Report was used by Project LINK leaders to inform decisions about allocation of resources and directions for future growth. The report provided

an initial snapshot of levels of integration against which future growth was compared. Project Directors and organizational leaders who have engaged in the workshop have utilized the information and analysis from the Collaboration Baseline Data Report for annual performance reporting, creating marketing tools, and communicating issues related to sustainability to federal project officers, school administrators, and the public.

#### **Step 4—Assess Growth in Collaboration**

Periodically throughout the norming/performing and transforming/adjourning stages of alliance development, all key stakeholders and alliance representatives are invited to a follow-up workshop designed to focus on assessing and building collaboration. Often, new organizational partners will have joined the initiative since its inception and need to be brought into the fold. New partners will become acquainted with existing team members and all partners in the collaborative endeavor will come to better understand the overarching goals of the initiative and the growth made thus far. Additionally, all members of the alliance need a refresher in the multiple meanings of collaboration and a chance to identify and describe examples of collaborative success and change. In the follow-up collaboration workshop, post-baseline data for the initiative can be identified and recorded, which allows project managers and agency leaders to ascertain and celebrate the growth in their collaborative efforts over time. The essential components of a collaboration growth assessment workshop are similar to those in Step 2.

To set the context, representatives from all agencies participating in the initiative are invited to the full or half day collaboration workshop. Participants are reoriented to the SAFAR (Fig. 2), and to the purpose, strategies/tasks, leadership/decision-making, and interpersonal characteristics of collaboration. Participants are asked to share successes and the evidence that they have gathered which suggests they are cultivating collaboration. Participants are also asked to share lessons learned including, reflections and perspectives regarding levels of integration within and across the alliance. After the initial discussion, representatives from all organizational units are again asked to work with other agency personnel to determine current level of integration (now post-baseline data) and to revise, if appropriate, their projected long-term level of integration within their own organization and between their agency and all the other partners. At the conclusion of the workshop and after the data has been collected using the SAFAR recording spreadsheet (Fig. 4), participants are then asked to once again describe the organizational and procedural steps they anticipate needing to take in order to move toward their ideal level of integration. They are prompted to discuss: (1) *what it would look like if they reached their ideal level of integration*, (2) *what actions they need to take to bring about or maintain their ideal level of integration*, and (3) *the evidence that would indicate that they have reached their ideal level of integration*. Descriptions of the ideal levels of integration, the planned actions to bring about ideal levels of integration, and a list of evidence that would indicate achievement of their ideal levels of integration is again recorded and collected for analysis and summarization in a report.

Collaboration reports should be generated by the evaluator each time Step 4 is repeated. The quantitative and qualitative analysis and summary information contained in the follow-up collaboration reports can be used by alliance leaders to judge the efficacy of management decisions about allocation of resources and plans for development that were implemented since the beginning of the initiative.

The qualitative data generated by discussion prompts about intra- and inter-organizational action plans and evidence of achievement in Step 2 gave all partners the opportunity to see where and how growth in collaboration occurred. In Project LINK, the Collaboration Baseline Assessment and follow-up reports showcased the fact that the overall composite level of integration grew from networking (1) to cooperating (2.2) over the course of the first year of implementation and from 2.2 to 2.6 by the end of year two (Research and Development Center, 2002). Project LINK leaders and members have used the information provided in the Collaboration Baseline and collaboration follow-up reports generated as part of this four-step assessment process to document and describe growth in collaboration both quantitatively and qualitatively and to communicate needs and successes to federal project officers, stakeholders, accreditation bodies, project management, media, and the public.

### SUMMARY

Increasingly, business, non-profits, and health and educational agencies are coming to consider collaboration as a powerful strategy to achieve a vision otherwise not possible to obtain as independent entities working alone. But the definition of collaboration is elusive and it is difficult for practitioners to put into practice and assess with certainty. Program evaluators can assist practitioners concerned with the development of a strategic alliance predicated on collaboration by understanding and utilizing the principles of collaboration theory. These principles include: (1) collaboration is an imperative, (2) collaboration is known by many names, (3) collaboration is journey and not a destination, (4) with collaboration the personal is as important as the procedural, and (5) collaboration develops in stages. These principles provide the theoretical underpinning for the SAFAR, which is an assessment tool that has been used successfully as part of a four-step evaluation process to help safe school alliance members quantitatively and qualitatively self-assess, gauge, celebrate and communicate about the relative strength of their collaborative endeavor over time.

### NOTE

1. In an age of scarce resources, competition and complex community issues—organizational collaboration is essential. However, the degree or level of collaboration necessary to counter and address these issues will vary and is dependent on the resources and vision of those that choose to work together. Autonomous entities may choose not to work together at all, but the choice not to collaborate may be temporary or result from the fact that the goals of the respective organizations are not of mutual importance. It is true that some independent groups may decide not to strategically align—perhaps from their perspective there appears to be no reason to do so—resources are not scarce, the societal issues they are addressing are not overly complex or because competition is not a factor. In reality, however, multifaceted issues of concern in today's society cannot be effectively addressed by autonomous organizational entities working independently. The need for organizational collaboration through strategic alliances has become an imperative.

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