



Regional Collaborative Leadership and Resilience

NCCEA, October 2025

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Goals

- ☐ We will explore how collaborative leadership can be a strategy for resilience, including by applying a tool to identify four kinds of boundary work to improve our regional impact.
- ☐ We will learn to recognize signs that our work needs to be re-scaled and be introduced to a structured approach to starting small to promote impact and innovation.
- ☐ We'll workshop ideas with colleagues from across the region to collaborative on high-priority needs and opportunities.

Monday's agenda

- Cross-sector leadership for resilience
- Break
- A strategic tool for starting small and scaling up
- Questions for tomorrow's program area breakouts

Tuesday's agenda

- Takeaways on collaboration from program area breakouts
- Boundary work strategies for efficient resilience
- Break
- Structured work time for exploring multi-state collaborative initiatives
- Synthesis



Cross-sector leadership for resilience

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Cross-sector leadership

The goal of the Center for Integrative Leadership is to catalyze and inform collaborative action for public good by the **business, government, and non-profit sectors.**



CENTER FOR
INTEGRATIVE LEADERSHIP

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



Cross-sector leadership

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For today's NCCEA context, you might also think of industries, program areas, states, academic disciplines, etc.



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Rationale #1: Necessity

Distributed authority, engagement, and resources mean that a cross-sector approach may be required to enact positive change (at all or to scale) on certain complex and significant (perhaps seemingly overwhelming or intractable) challenges.

Every sector has a self-interest, a need, a contribution, a knowledge base, or other resources implicated in every major issue of the day.

Rationale #2: Innovation

Diverse approaches, skills, experiences, and ways of knowing may mean that a cross-sector approach is more likely to lead to imagination and innovation on certain complex and significant (perhaps seemingly overwhelming or intractable) challenges.

Rationale #3: Promise of larger-scale change

“[L]arge-scale social change comes from **better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations**. Evidence of the effectiveness of this approach is still limited, but these examples suggest that substantially greater progress could be made in alleviating many of our most serious and complex social problems if nonprofits, governments, businesses, and the public were brought together around a common agenda to create collective impact.”

– Kania & Kramer (2011)

Rationale #4: A resource for resilience

- What does resilience mean to you?
- What are the tests of resilience that Extension is facing right now?

Rationale #4: A resource for resilience

Resilience is the ability to re-organize knowledge, practices, and resources to continue to move forward in a desired direction, amidst disruption or severe resource constraint. Collaborative leadership is a resource for efficient resilience because it facilitates sharing, generation, and synergy among resources.

– Quick & Feldman, 2014

What's hard about cross-sector initiatives?

What's hard about cross-sector initiatives?

- Outside of established organizational frameworks, leadership structures, resource arrangements, etc.
- Can involve under-developed interpersonal relationships
- Requires the nitty gritty of moving together from ideas and intent to action, between big aspirations and achievable goals
- Sometimes overwhelming

Encountering the overwhelm

- Motivation to work across sectors often comes from recognizing the need for structural or systemic change to address a particularly complex challenge.
- Aspiring collaborators can become mired in the complexity of such issues.

Signs the scale of action is overwhelming

Signs the scale of action is overwhelming

- You're stuck admiring the problem. You can't agree on:
 - How to define the challenge you want to address
 - Priorities (in general, and where to start)
 - Who is going to do what
 - Who's going to pay for things
- You do agree.... but the goals are so ambitious that:
 - You are not sufficiently connected, credible, resourced, etc.
 - It is so diffuse or so hard that participants burn out or drift away



Break

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A strategic tool for starting small and scaling up

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What's the allure of going big?

First, let's acknowledge the
seductive appeal of going big

What's the allure of going big?

- Compelling, urgent nature of the problem
- Belief that you can't work at systemic issues except at a systemic level
- Optimism that so much effort will surely have a big impact
- Stakeholders' fatigue with lack of progress and a desire to "go big or go home"
- Leadership ambition

A strategic approach to navigate the overwhelm

Start_{Small}

Going small and tailoring your initiative to what you can do and where you can work is not at odds with “going big.” It is a strategy for contributing to the promise of large-scale change.

If you want meaningful innovation...

It's a balance of:

- Not losing the big idea
- Moving beyond aspiration to action
- Being realistic about your connections, credibility, and resources
- Not punishing failure if those actions fail... because failure is often the expected outcome

Why does this lead to greater traction?

- Substitute some of the planning efforts with doing or experimenting
- Refocus the nature of success/failure
 - From a single global assessment
 - To steps that can inform building a towards the larger goal
 - More focus on ‘what did we learn’?
 - Adjusting based on this prototype.

Cross-sector initiatives should start small



Laird, Quick, & Shaver (2024), *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

https://z.umn.edu/Start_small

Illustration by Juan Bernabeau

What is an MVB?

- For start ups with limited resources, structured experimentation can help test potential introduction to launch.
 - In the business world, these small, proof-of-concept products are known as minimum viable products (MVP).
- The MVB is an MVP for the social innovation space.
- In cross-sector efforts, an MVB is an intervention that the group designs and implements to test an intervention, learn and reduce risk, and prepare to scale up effort.

Who are we? What does our group have to offer?

Why? What challenge are we passionate about?

Where? In what region or community are we connected?

What? Which specific need or opportunity are we placed to work on?

Factual foundations? What do we know about this need? Where can we fill gaps to meet it?

Scale, pivot, or stop?
What did we learn? Should we scrap, modify, replicate, or scale up?

How will we implement?
What is our 1-year plan for resources, actions, and evaluation?

What is the MVB? How can we contribute to addressing the problem?

Reflections

- Are you stuck in the overwhelm? What are the signs for your effort?
- How is your scale of effort working for or against you?
- Should you scale down, right-size, or re-sequence your initiative?

In your context

- How could you encourage starting small and iterating?
- What may inhibit trying things out, failing and learning, and trying again?

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Questions for tomorrow's program area breakouts

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Strategic collaboration and scale

1. Identify 1-2 examples of multistate collaborations (team approaches) that you consider successful.
2. What are 3-5 specific things you can do in your role (as a state program leader) that foster strong collaborations (e.g., in-state and/or multi-state)?
3. Would it be constructive to scale up or scale down any part of your programming?
4. What are the impacts of multistate partnerships that matter to our partners, constituents, and funders?

Strategic collaboration and scale

- Round-robin style, share 2 key takeaways from morning discussions about factors that have made collaborations fruitful.
- At least one of the take-aways should be something to sustain.



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Takeaways on collaboration from program area breakouts

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Boundary work strategies for efficient resilience

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Denaturalizing boundaries (Abbott 1995)

- Boundaries are emergent, dynamic, and created at “sites of difference”
They are *not* necessarily barriers.

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- Boundaries are emergent, dynamic, and created at “sites of difference”
They are *not* necessarily barriers.
- Entities constituted through flexible, linked, complex boundaries are more resilient than rigidly defined ones.



Commonly experienced boundaries

What boundaries -- or sites of difference – do you experience in your collaborative work?



Commonly experienced boundaries

- Organizational (departmental, inside/ outside, with/ by/ for stakeholders)
- Ways of knowing (disciplines, expert / practical)
- Sectoral
- Hierarchies
- Identities and backgrounds
- Issues and problem definitions
- Timeframes



Boundary work supports resilience (Quick & Feldman 2014)

- Aligning across differences

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Boundary work supports resilience (Quick & Feldman 2014)

- Aligning across differences
- Exchanging and translating across differences
- Removing or diminishing differences
- Reinforcing or creating boundaries

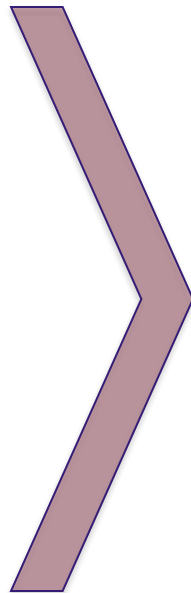
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- Supports redundancy
- Strengthens connections
- Diversifies connections

Boundary opportunities and practices

1. What is a significant boundary (site of difference) you navigate in your collaborative work?
2. In what ways are you aligning across, translating across, removing, or reinforcing the boundary?
3. Are those boundary strategies working well for you? How could you re-set your boundary work to gain more from your collaboration?

Exploring multi-state collaborative initiatives

- Rural and Youth Mental Health
- Revitalizing Rural Communities
- Youth Brain Drain and Workforce Shortages
- Climate-Resilient Infrastructure for Water and Economic Stability
- Youth Engagement in Agri-Tech and Environmental Stewardship
- Local Food System Development to Improve Health and Economy



Break

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Structured work time for exploring multi-state collaborative initiatives

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Exploring opportunities

1. Why? What do you care about, that a bigger scale and/or collaboration would help with?
2. What? Brainstorm activities you could collaborate on.

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1. Why? What do you care about, that a bigger scale and/or collaboration would help with?
2. What? Brainstorm activities you could collaborate on.
3. How might you collaborate and/or scale the work?

Do you want to align your activities, learn more from each so that you can replicate (with appropriate contextualization) successful models? Do you want to create a superstructure or some kind to join up as one big team? Or do something else?

One idea to share with the rest of the room

3 sentences (60 seconds or less)

- Your theme area
- Why collaborate?
- What and how: One idea about how you might collaborate



Synthesis

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Session recap

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Thank you!

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