

Collective Impact for Institutional Reform in Higher Education: A Case Study of UC Davis's Catalyzing Impact Initiative

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Abstract

This article examines how the collective impact framework can drive internal cultural and organizational change within higher education institutions to enhance community engagement and public impact. Using the Catalyzing Impact Initiative at the University of California, Davis, as a case study, we explore how collective impact can address internal strategies for improving university-wide engagement practices. Launched by the Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement (PSE) in 2024, the initiative formed interdisciplinary working groups, including diverse campus units and community partners. Unlike traditional applications of collective impact, which focus on external collaborations between the university and broader community, this initiative prioritizes internal transformation to foster greater accountability and institutional support for community engagement. We document the initiative's implementation, analyze the role of PSE as a backbone structure, and discuss the opportunities and challenges to using collective impact for cultural change in higher education.

Keywords: collective impact, institutional change, community engagement



Kania and Kramer (2011) defined collective impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p. 36). Initially developed in the nonprofit sector, the collective impact framework emerged as a collaborative, place-based approach for driving large-scale social change (Hanleybrown et al., 2012) and has since gained recognition as a model for advancing social progress (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The collective impact framework outlines several conditions for successful application, including a centralized infrastructure or a “backbone” organization that aligns and coordinates the initiative.

In higher education, collective impact is increasingly applied to address campus-community partnerships, community-based research, and broader community engagement

efforts (Orphan et al., 2018; Schindler et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). Scholarship on collective impact highlights its potential for transformational change, particularly when integrated with community-engaged frameworks to enhance universities' ability to achieve meaningful and large-scale community impact (Brown & Moore, 2019; DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; B. Jones et al., 2017; Orphan et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017). Most collective impact applications in higher education have emphasized external engagement with stakeholders and community partners; however, there has been limited attention to how collective impact can also be a tool for driving internal institutional transformation.

Ramaley et al. (2023) argued that “there is a direct connection between the university's capacity to advance external transformations in society and their ability to organize around and advance effective responses

to complex issues internally” (p. 43). This argument suggests a critical need to examine how collective impact can be applied by universities to address internal challenges, including rethinking responsibility allocation, accountability structures, and decision-making processes. This article addresses a gap in current research by exploring how collective impact can drive internal cultural and organizational change within higher education institutions, specifically in relation to community engagement and public impact.

In 2024, the Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement (PSE) at the University of California, Davis, launched the Catalyzing Impact Initiative as part of a university-wide effort to improve and assess public impact and community engagement. The Catalyzing Impact Initiative applies the collective impact framework to address a unique challenge: fostering cultural change within the university to enhance community engagement. This initiative departs from traditional collective impact approaches by prioritizing internal transformation through infrastructure that incentivizes and evaluates community-engaged teaching, learning, and research, while fostering accountability to community stakeholders and reshaping norms around recognition, rewards, and evaluation.

This article presents a case study of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative, examining its use of collective impact as a framework for building institutional capacity for community engagement. Specifically, we analyze the initiative’s structures and strategies, the challenges and opportunities identified by working group members, and the role of PSE as a backbone structure within the framework. The following research questions guide our study:

1. How does the Catalyzing Impact Initiative utilize the collective impact framework to address internal institutional challenges and foster university-wide cultural change?
2. What are the key challenges and opportunities identified by participants in implementing the initiative?
3. How does the PSE office function as a backbone structure to support cross-campus collaboration and institutional transformation?

Review of the Literature

Collective impact initiatives aim to bring together community organizations, government, and businesses to address complex social challenges such as economic development, public health issues, climate change, and education. As described by Kania and Kramer in 2011, collective impact outlines five conditions for success:

1. Common agenda: a shared vision and definition of the problem with agreed-upon goals.
2. Shared measurement: a consensus on measuring and reporting progress, allowing continuous learning, improvement, and accountability.
3. Mutually reinforcing activities: coordination of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing action plan.
4. Continuous communication: a consistent way for organizations to build trust and create new relationships.
5. Centralized infrastructure: a “backbone” organization that aligns and coordinates initiatives.

These conditions, along with preconditions like influential champions, sufficient financial resources, and a shared sense of urgency, provide the foundation for achieving systems-level change (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). Kania et al. (2014) also called for fundamental mindset changes, such as prioritizing the inclusion of individuals with lived experience, embracing relational problem-solving, and acknowledging that solutions must adapt to evolving contexts. This approach differs from more centralized or top-down approaches to community service by emphasizing the importance of engagement and collaboration by multiple stakeholders. The collective impact framework has been applied to a variety of local issues and contexts, including improving maternal and child health outcomes in North Carolina (Schaffer et al., 2022), reducing childhood obesity in Victoria, Australia (Bolton et al., 2022), and aligning education systems in Central Texas (FSG, 2013).

Although the collective impact framework has gained momentum, scholars have identified some limitations, particularly regarding its insufficient attention to equity, power, and meaningful engagement with those most affected by systemic inequities

(Wolff et al., 2017). Critics argue that the framework often privileges business leaders, government agencies, and philanthropies while sidelining the voices of impacted communities. Responding to the critiques, Kania et al. (2022) revised the collective impact definition, positioning equity as a prerequisite for success. This updated framework emphasizes collaboration among community members, organizations, and institutions to achieve systems-level and population-level change, centering equity as the driving force.

In addition to a greater focus on equity, relational work has emerged as a critical component for addressing power imbalances that hinder progress. Milligan et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces for participants to connect authentically, confront differing perspectives, and heal from past harms. Scholars have further advocated for collective healing practices to address biases, privilege, and structural inequities, urging collective impact collaborators to reexamine their own roles in perpetuating systemic injustices (Cowan et al., 2022; Weaver, 2020). These developments reflect a growing recognition that achieving sustainable systems change requires not just strategic alignment but also a deep commitment to equity and relational accountability.

Institutional Change and Collective Impact in Higher Education

Institutional transformation in higher education is complex, requiring multiple change theories to capture its full scope. Kezar (2018) advocated for drawing from various frameworks, as no single theory fully explains organizational change. Analysis of institutional transformation must encompass the interplay of institutional culture, external pressures, and internal power dynamics. Cultural change perspective, for instance, suggests that organizational culture evolves slowly and non-linearly in response to external shifts, with deeply embedded, implicit assumptions and values that require context-specific interventions. Similarly, institutional change perspective focuses on the unique context of higher education, where both internal factors (like faculty governance) and external pressures (such as political and economic forces) influence change.

Considering these institutional change approaches in higher education, we view collective impact as a tool for fostering a shared vision across diverse units, shifting cultural

assumptions about collaboration and community engagement, and aligning internal and external forces to drive institutional transformation. Over the past decade, collective impact has gained traction in higher education, particularly in campus-community partnerships and community engagement (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; Fox et al., 2023; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Lane, 2015; Orphan et al., 2018; Schindler et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). DePrince and DiEnno (2019) highlighted the synergy between collective impact and community engagement, noting that community engagement can help address collective impact's challenges, and collective impact can, in turn, strengthen universities' efforts to drive large-scale community change (p. 25). Some institutions leverage collective impact for initiatives like the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; Lane, 2015; Orphan et al., 2018), and others integrate it into strategic frameworks to address grand challenges, foster university-community collaboration, and advance anchor-institution missions (DiEnno et al., 2024; Gomez et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017).

Universities as Backbone Organizations

According to Kania and Kramer's (2011) conditions for collective impact success, the backbone organization is a centralized infrastructure that aligns and coordinates initiatives. Alternative terms like "anchor entity," "orchestra conductor," and "quarterback" are also used to describe this role (Edmondson, 2013; Erickson et al., 2012; Turner, 2015). In other words, the backbone organization is the "glue" that bonds participants to the mission and the infrastructure, support, and leadership required to navigate the collaboration and keep participants accountable (DuBow et al., 2018). Much of the work of the backbone organization centers on "changing the attitudes and behaviors of a diverse group of stakeholders" (Turner et al., 2013).

Community-based organizations, with their deep local ties, often serve as backbone support in collective impact initiatives (Klempin, 2016), and research has shown that community-based backbone organizations can be as diverse as local health departments (Schaffer et al., 2022), local primary care partnerships (Bolton et al., 2022), and local business and community leaders (FSG, 2013). However, in the context of higher education, research suggests that

university units may be better positioned for this role (Brown & Moore, 2019; Fox et al., 2023; Garber & Adams, 2017; B. Jones et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). University engagement centers, in particular, are well-suited to act as backbones due to their established relationships with administrators, faculty, students, staff, and community members (B. Jones et al., 2017; DePrince & DiEnno, 2019). These centers often possess the trust and credibility necessary to integrate diverse perspectives and foster collaboration with community organizations (DePrince & DiEnno, 2019; Garber & Adams, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Scholars have begun exploring the potential of decentralized, nonhierarchical networks to serve as backbone structures, expanding the possibilities for collaborative models (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016; Schuler et al., 2017; Fox et al., 2023).

Collective Impact Challenges in Higher Education

Establishing expectations and a common agenda remains a central challenge in collective impact initiatives within higher education. Smith et al. (2017) argued that historical and contemporary university-community power dynamics complicate higher education institutions' ability to act as neutral brokers in such initiatives. At several universities, difficulties in aligning diverse priorities have hindered the development of a shared community vision. For instance, at Virginia Commonwealth University, differing solutions to the same problem obstructed the creation of a unified agenda (Smith et al., 2017). Similarly, Garber and Adams (2017) emphasized the challenge of reconciling the individual interests of organizations with a collective community focus, often leading to siloed priorities. Furthermore, community members frequently expect universities to dictate priorities and solutions (Garber & Adams, 2017). To address these issues, Sgoutas-Emch and Guerrieri (2020) suggested fostering dialogue across projects and engaging in preplanning to better understand community needs before implementing initiatives.

In light of these challenges, Brown and Moore (2019) highlighted the emergence of university community-engaged professionals (CEPs), who play a key role in bridging campus and community through research collaborations, student learning, and advancing the anchor institution's mission. However, a gap persists between the work of CEPs and systematic, longitudinal research

assessing the impact of these efforts. Brown and Moore proposed juxtaposing the lived experiences of CEPs with collective impact principles to better align daily practice with empirical studies of collaborative work with scholars (p. 9).

Boundary Spanning in Higher Education

Along these lines, Ramaley (2014) described how CEPs often serve as critical boundary spanners, navigating complex environments characterized by scarce resources, limited authority, and multiple layers of institutional hierarchy. Operating at the intersection of academic and community contexts, these individuals leverage their familiarity with one context to build bridges with the other. Their primary responsibility is to foster partnerships and create pathways for collaboration that are mutual, reciprocal, and rooted in shared purpose. Ramaley also noted that engagement in higher education often exists in pockets, such as individual faculty research projects or isolated curricular innovations. As a result, boundary spanners play a critical role in connecting these disparate efforts, helping institutions move beyond isolated or discipline-focused projects to develop a more integrated and systemic approach to community engagement.

Similarly, DiEnno et al. (2024) emphasized the critical role of professional development for boundary spanners and highlighted how engagement offices can champion this effort by serving as the backbone structure in collective impact initiatives. Supporting the development of engagement offices as boundary spanners can shift institutional culture toward engagement models that prioritize cocreation and respect across disciplines and societal sectors. Building on this growing body of literature, the following section presents our case study of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative at UC Davis.

About the Catalyzing Impact Initiative

UC Davis is one of 10 campuses within the University of California system, a large, decentralized system of research universities that spans the state of California. As a land-grant institution, UC Davis was founded with a mandate to provide education and research that address societal needs, particularly in the areas of agriculture and environmental sciences. Despite this historical mandate, community engagement at UC Davis has

largely been addressed through decentralized, discipline-based offices, leading to challenges in developing a university-wide approach to community engagement. In 2015, UC Davis earned national recognition for its dedication to community engagement through the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Community Engagement Classification. The classification process identified the need for a university-wide entity to support and strengthen the growing network of individuals and groups across campus. It also highlighted the importance of establishing permanent resources to support, recognize, and reward public scholarship. In response, UC Davis launched PSE in 2019 as a unit within the Office of the Provost. Drawing from emerging scholarship on collective impact, PSE assumed a backbone role, serving as a connective hub to coordinate and convene university-wide efforts. Its mission focuses on expanding the scope and scale of publicly engaged research and teaching across the institution (Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement, 2019).

As UC Davis prepared to pursue Carnegie reclassification in 2026, PSE staff sought to assess and evaluate the university's community engagement activities. PSE saw the need to improve assessment infrastructure to understand the university's public impact better, strengthen collaborations among university units and between university researchers and community partners, and develop a strategy for future capacity building to support and expand public impact. In winter 2024, PSE launched the Catalyzing Impact Initiative to pursue these goals.

The working groups were organized using the collective impact framework. Instead of relying on leadership to direct change, we sought to gather knowledge from stakeholders. In this case, the stakeholders were faculty and staff who were invested in institutional culture change and who were considered CEPs due to their direct involvement in community engagement at UC Davis. In addition, community partners were involved in each working group to provide perspectives from organizations with experience partnering with UC Davis. The initiative comprised three working groups focused on community partnerships, assessment and integration, and communications and messaging. Campus leadership guided PSE staff in choosing working group members; ultimately, those identified for participation

received a letter of appointment from the university provost. Participants were chosen based on past involvement with PSE's community engagement programs, as well as their strategic positioning as impactful leaders on campus. Each working group included 10 to 12 faculty or staff members from across university units and programs. Approximately 30 research centers and university offices across campus were represented in the working groups, including the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Government and Community Relations; Global Affairs; Grand Challenges; Undergraduate Education; and Strategic Communications. Each working group also included two community partners who were compensated for their time commitment.

Each working group was led by two co-chairs, who were tasked with setting agendas and facilitating the monthly meetings. At least two PSE staff members attended each monthly meeting and served in the backbone role. Each working group met monthly, and two co-chairs in each working group also held separate meetings with PSE staff to plan meeting agendas and manage other logistical tasks. A steering committee made up of university administrative teams served in an advisory role for the working groups. This group met quarterly with the working group co-chairs to hear updates from the working groups, provide feedback, and ultimately disseminate the outputs and recommendations produced by the working groups to university leadership councils, led by the chancellor and provost. This organizational structure was intended to ensure the initiative's alignment with university priorities and to keep leadership informed at all phases of the initiative (see Figure 1).

Each working group was tasked with addressing a different aspect of community engagement at UC Davis (see Figure 2). The Community Partnerships group was tasked with developing a university-wide definition of community engagement, developing qualitative data collection methods such as surveys that can regularly assess the quality of community partnerships, and introducing a software platform that would help track community partnerships across the university. The Assessment and Integration group was tasked with exploring existing and new data sources on public impact and developing an internal-facing data dashboard to track student outcomes, faculty research outcomes, and institutional

Figure 1. Catalyzing Impact Initiative Structure

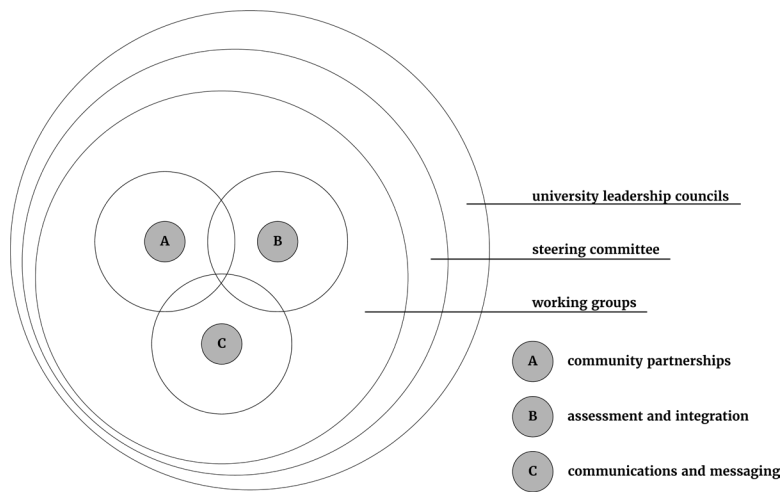
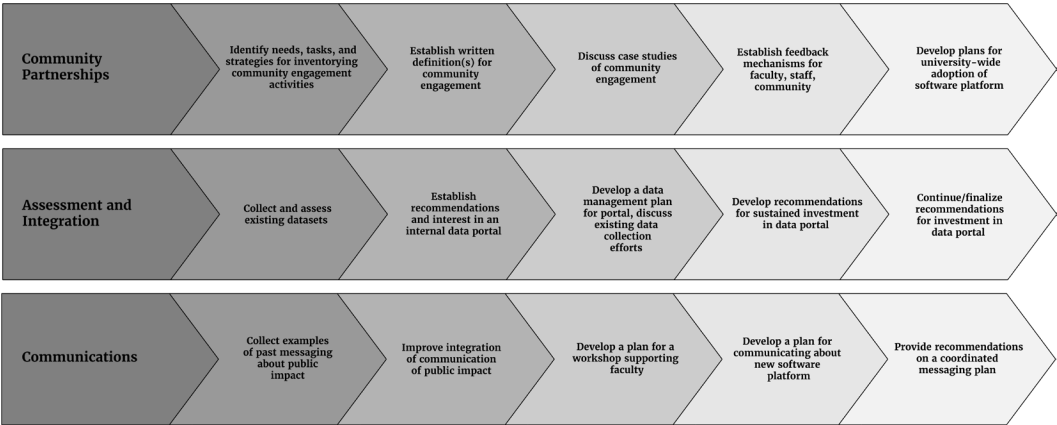


Figure 2. Details of Working Groups Milestones



investments that are tied to public scholarship and community engagement. The Communications and Messaging group was tasked with collecting case studies or stories of public impact, crafting a university-wide messaging strategy about public impact, and communicating the data collection efforts to university units. PSE staff developed broad goals and milestones for each working group before the initiative began, but remained open to the process of feedback and common agenda setting by the working groups, as advocated by Kania and Kramer (2013) for collective impact initiatives.

Method

This study used a qualitative, interpretivist single case study design to examine the internal organizational context of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative at UC

Davis. Data were collected over one year, from January 2024 to December 2024, enabling an in-depth exploration of organizational processes and collaborative dynamics over time. The case focused on the initiative’s internal structure and its three working groups: Community Partnerships, Assessment and Integration, and Communication and Messaging. The study sample consisted of 40 participants ($N = 40$) from these working groups, representing a diverse cross-section of faculty, staff, and community partners. As previously stated, each working group was composed of 10 to 12 faculty or staff members representing multiple university units and programs, as well as two community partners with prior collaborative projects with UC Davis. Community partners were compensated by PSE for their participation in the working groups. The research questions

were designed to explore how participants understood, experienced, and enacted organizational change within the initiative. This study did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, as it was conducted as an internal initiative at UC Davis and met exemption criteria for projects involving university faculty and staff.

As scholar-practitioners, our positionality as employees of PSE at UC Davis is central to understanding the context and nuances of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative. One of us serves as a postdoctoral scholar and the other as a program manager in PSE. We were both deeply involved in the initiative's development. We contributed to each of the initiative's working groups, where we co-facilitated meetings alongside the working group cochairs. In this role, we supported the cochairs in preparing and facilitating monthly meetings, delivering presentations, and assigning tasks to group members. Additionally, we followed up with members between meetings to ensure ongoing engagement and progress.

Survey and Focus Groups

Before developing the survey, we conducted a comprehensive document analysis to trace the history and evolution of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative. This process involved reviewing agendas, meeting minutes, and milestones to identify key transformative changes and assess the initiative's progress over time.

An anonymous online qualitative survey was administered to all 40 members of the three working groups 6 months into the initiative (June 2024) as an initial data collection method. The survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to gather participants' perspectives and experiences related to their involvement in the Catalyzing Impact Initiative. Questions explored participants' motivations for joining the working groups, understanding of the groups' mission and expectations, perceptions of meeting structure and logistics, connections between working group activities and the broader initiative, ability to participate openly, and overall feedback on their experience. The survey was conducted anonymously to ensure confidentiality and reduce potential biases due to the researchers' proximity to the working groups. Survey responses, which yielded a 60% response rate, provided an overview of perspectives

across working groups and informed subsequent stages of data analysis.

In addition to the survey, we conducted focus groups during the in-person working groups' retreat in August 2024. Using semistructured, open-ended questions, the focus groups were designed to gather participants' perspectives on the initiative's progress and the potential for sustaining the work beyond the conclusion of the working groups in spring 2025. A total of 25 participants took part, representing a cross-section of the three working groups. Participants were asked to reflect on the aspects of their working group's work they would most like to see implemented within their own units or organizations, the barriers that might prevent this work from continuing, and the types of support, including support from PSE, that would be necessary to sustain these efforts.

Analysis

The open-ended survey responses and focus group transcripts were entered into NVivo for analysis. We conducted an iterative coding process using a narrative approach (S. R. Jones et al., 2013) combined with thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). Initial analyses involved open coding to identify salient themes, refine emerging patterns, and build a coding structure. A constant comparative method allowed us to move from specific text segments to broader themes and subthemes, reaching saturation (Creswell et al., 2007). We employed several strategies to ensure the credibility and rigor of our findings. A key component was frequent debriefing sessions with our Public Scholarship and Engagement team, including the vice provost and associate vice provost of public scholarship. These collaborative sessions provided invaluable opportunities for reflection, allowing us to explore alternative approaches and identify potential flaws in our proposed course of action (Shenton, 2004). In addition, we shared our preliminary analysis with members of each working group for feedback. Furthermore, in fall 2024, we presented our study at the annual conference of the International Association for Research on Service-learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), where we received additional feedback from academic peers and colleagues. This external commentary allowed us to refine our arguments and ensure that our findings were well-supported by the data and aligned with broader academic discussions.

Findings

To evaluate the implementation of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative, findings are presented in relation to the research questions and framed through Kania and Kramer's (2011) five conditions for collective impact success: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organization. Our findings include three overarching themes. The first theme, meeting organization and structure, addresses how the initiative aligned with the conditions of continuous communication and mutually reinforcing activities. The second theme, group member motivations and commitment, relates to participants' engagement, perceived challenges, and opportunities, corresponding to the common agenda condition. The third theme, initiative sustainability, examines factors influencing the continuation and institutionalization of the working group efforts, linking to the importance of backbone support. Each theme is presented with participant feedback that highlights the successes, challenges, and potential areas for improvement, providing a foundation for discussion of the initiative's progress, effectiveness, and implications for fostering university-wide change.

Meeting Organization and Structure

Various tools were used to facilitate mutual trust and collaboration among participants, including structured large-group discussions, small-group activities, and "homework" assignments completed between meetings and shared in subsequent sessions. These assignments encouraged participants to apply their individual skills toward completing overall project goals, reflecting the collective impact condition of mutually reinforcing activities. Activities during meetings, including structured discussions, were designed to maintain continuous communication, ensuring that ideas and progress flowed openly among participants. Both of these conditions are critical to the successful coordination and implementation of the initiative.

In the survey, participants spoke highly of how the working group meetings fostered a collaborative and learning-centered environment, focusing on experimentation, dialogue, and reflection. They appreciated the use of engaging tools such as structured agendas, breakout rooms, virtual whiteboards, and homework assignments, all of

which encouraged active participation. As one participant noted in the survey:

I think our homework assignments promote reflection by giving people time to simmer in their thoughts after the meeting and then provide an anonymous perspective—this was especially important around the final drafts of the definitions, where people had a chance to “thumbs down” a definition if they found it really problematic and could do so in a way that didn't put anyone on the spot in the moment, but let all of us think and reflect before reacting.

Additionally, members shared that the meetings provided valuable opportunities to exchange insights through presentations, resource sharing, and open discussions. These exchanges were often taken back to their teams for further exploration and action. Another member shared:

Hands-down the most valuable part of this for me is talking about all of this with people from very different UCD units and community groups and seeing how we all approach this work similarly and differently.

I really love our working group.

The structure of the meetings was described as well-organized, maintaining a balance of structure and flexibility that allowed for open communication and participation. Members felt that this balance fostered an atmosphere of trust, where individuals could freely express ideas and engage with one another. One member noted, “I appreciate the format and camaraderie, which allows every member to be seen and heard.”

It is important to note that the working group meetings were all hosted virtually via Zoom, except for an in-person midyear retreat in August 2024. Several participants expressed excitement about meeting each other in person for the first time after 6 months of working online. One participant shared, “The retreat today really rekindled my excitement. An in-person day was a really great idea, and this was a good time to do it to keep that enthusiasm flowing.”

Despite the positive feedback on the structure of the meetings, several challenges emerged, particularly around time and

capacity limitations. Many participants indicated that, although the meetings were beneficial, their busy schedules and multiple responsibilities made it difficult to fully engage. One participant shared:

The amount of time that is diverted from our day job in support of extra-curricular committee work is grossly underestimated. Meetings, emails, doodle polls, pre work, post work, report writing, multi-hour retreat days . . . it's A LOT.

There was also feedback requesting greater clarity on how meetings build on each other over time and what happens with the information generated at each session. For instance, one member shared, "[I'm] not clear what decisions the workgroup is involved in making. It feels that we provide input, but it is unclear what happens with it." Some participants noted that they would appreciate a clearer sense of how each meeting contributes to the broader goals of the initiative and how the insights from the meetings are utilized.

Group Member Motivations and Commitment

The motivation and commitment of working group members were crucial aspects of this study, particularly as university leadership played a role in developing a common agenda and partially inviting or assigning members. After analyzing the correlation between participants' stated interest in joining the working group and their commitment to the initiative, we found that approximately 60% demonstrated both strong motivation and deep commitment. For many, motivations ranged from a personal passion for community-engaged work to a professional alignment with the initiative's objectives. One participant shared:

I wanted to learn more about the community-engaged work happening on campus, meet people who are engaged with this work, and contribute to documenting and communicating the impact and importance of this work through the Carnegie application and beyond.

This sentiment was echoed by others, who felt a strong connection between the initiative's goals and their own work, noting that the project's relevance to their roles helped foster their enthusiasm: "It seemed like a

neat opportunity to help out. As a graduate of UC Davis now working with UCD faculty, I thought I could offer some interesting perspectives."

In contrast, some participants expressed a more moderate level of engagement, citing the need for tangible benefits or clearer alignment with their own work goals. The issue of overextension due to multiple competing commitments was frequently mentioned as a barrier to deeper involvement. Several members pointed out the difficulty of fully engaging when their work-life balance was stretched thin. One reaction reflected a common challenge:

I'm on a lot of committees, work groups, search panels, etc. and, in my experience, the engagement issue is common and not just with this initiative. People are overextended and in general, I think we need to be more judicious about starting new initiatives, committees, working groups, etc. that ask folks to volunteer their time on top of their already packed workload.

Furthermore, participants noted that sustaining their long-term commitment to this initiative was particularly challenging due to the absence of visible, immediate outcomes from their efforts. This lack of clarity around tangible progress left many questioning the value of their involvement. Several participants emphasized the need for a clearer definition of their roles as working group members, particularly in terms of actionable contributions and a better understanding of how their individual partnerships could directly benefit from this broader institutional work. One participant captured this sentiment, stating:

Given the slow pace of organizational change, any benefit to researchers engaged in this work or to community partners is unclear. It feels like the benefit is very unidirectional—to optimize optics for the university. I would feel more committed if I felt that my work and my partners would benefit from these efforts. The current efforts do not point to that benefit.

These reflections underscore the critical need to clarify roles and expectations as well as provide concrete resources and actionable

pathways to demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of this work for all stakeholders involved.

Initiative Sustainability

Participants overwhelmingly recognized the initiative's potential to make a significant impact across multiple campus units aligned with community engagement goals. However, concerns about its long-term sustainability emerged as a recurring theme. Members expressed unease about pulling resources away from other campus priorities and emphasized the importance of making the initiative self-supporting, including through the long-term presence of a backbone support, critical in Kania and Kramer's (2011) model of collective impact. Several participants highlighted the challenge of overburdening existing staff and faculty, noting the need for "tangible support and resources" to prevent "stretching folks too thin." To ensure the initiative's success beyond the working groups, participants provided several actionable recommendations.

Communication and Data Management

Members called for continued communication support to amplify the initiative's impact. Participants cited "managing, gathering, and disseminating stories of community engagement" as a crucial way to maintain momentum and demonstrate progress. They emphasized the need for PSE to foster interdisciplinary collaboration through regular meetings that align goals, facilitate ongoing dialogue, and ensure logistical coordination. As one participant suggested, PSE should "steward the process" by "convening stakeholders in a structured way around shared objectives."

Participants also highlighted the critical role of data in sustaining the initiative. They recommended that PSE lead efforts to collect, manage, and analyze data on community engagement activities across campus. This course of action would help assess the effectiveness of these efforts and provide data-driven insights to inform decision-making and demonstrate the initiative's value. For both of these recommendations, participants pointed to the necessity of a dedicated organization (in this case, PSE) to steward these efforts, highlighting the importance of the backbone role that Kania and Kramer (2011) included in their collective impact model. Within the university context, this

role could also be filled by boundary spanners, as described above.

Financial Resources and Systemic Change

Adequate funding was identified as essential for sustaining and expanding community engagement work. However, participants stressed that financial resources alone would not be sufficient. As one member explained, achieving long-term success requires deeper, systemic changes:

To be fully committed, there would need to be an allocation of real resources to the doing of CE [community engagement] work, including the alignment of policy and practice, and the corresponding people sitting at the table. There would also need to be some promise of what will change in the doing of CE that will make it less burdensome, more integrated, an acknowledgment of the misalignments, and a commitment from leadership to rectify these over time. Without that, it's just another flavor of smoke and mirrors.

Along these same lines, participants repeatedly underscored the importance of organizational and cultural shifts to complement financial support. Participants expressed a desire for greater commitment from institutional leadership to address existing misalignments and integrate community engagement into everyday practices. As one member noted, "There is comfort in knowing someone is working on a goal and sustaining it," highlighting the need for ongoing support from leadership to build trust and momentum.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this case study provide valuable insights into applying collective impact in a university setting. Specifically, the findings illuminate (1) how the Catalyzing Impact Initiative utilized the framework to address internal institutional challenges and foster university-wide cultural change, (2) the key challenges and opportunities identified by participants in implementing the initiative, and (3) how the PSE office functioned as a backbone structure to support cross-campus collaboration and institutional transformation. Although the survey responses and focus groups occurred midway through the implementation

of our initiative, they offered helpful information about PSE's role as a backbone and identified potential steps for future progress. Findings highlight the relational work required to create spaces for meaningful dialogue among working group members (Milligan et al., 2022) and the mindset shifts essential for sustainable systems change (Kania et al., 2014).

The findings revealed persistent capacity challenges and the siloed nature of university structures, which remain significant barriers to this work. Additionally, the pervasive influence of university culture continues to shape engagement efforts, underscoring the critical need for systemic change. A key tension lies in the disjointed leadership structures inherent to higher education institutions. Although the collective impact framework emphasizes a bottom-up leadership approach that brings diverse stakeholders into the decision-making, universities typically operate with top-down leadership models that ultimately rely on executives to direct change. These disconnects can hinder the effectiveness of culture change initiatives, as efforts to foster bottom-up collaboration may clash with hierarchical decision-making processes. Furthermore, the frequent turnover in executive leadership exacerbates these challenges, as shifting university priorities under new leaders can undermine the long-term sustainability of collective impact initiatives. In the following sections, we explore these challenges, their implications for advancing community engagement practices, and the pivotal role of boundary spanners in navigating these complexities to foster meaningful institutional change.

Capacity Challenges

Implementing collective impact within a university context requires a deep understanding of university culture, where faculty and staff are asked to take part in numerous committees, and assigning individuals to working groups is a common practice. Assigning working group members to the Catalyzing Impact Initiative was necessary to ensure key roles were represented; however, this approach can backfire if it includes participants who are less invested in the project's goals, and who are already overcommitted to other university responsibilities. The limited capacity of working group members was discussed in the survey and focus group, where members noted they were managing multiple work assignments

and committees, which limited their attention spans and commitment to the initiative. In the monthly meetings, this limited capacity made it difficult for working group coauthors to serve as the driving force of agendas, and for working group members to come to meetings fully prepared, limiting the ability of the group to develop a common agenda and participate in continuous communication (Conditions 1 and 4 in Kania and Kramer's [2011] collective impact framework). As a result, PSE staff were sometimes compelled to fill in gaps in leadership by guiding agenda creation or assigning work or readings between meetings.

We suspect that this dilemma is not unique to UC Davis. The multiple roles and responsibilities being filled by university staff members, and the increasing initiatives, committees, and task forces in university administrative circles, can result in over-taxation or burnout, requiring the backbone organization to assume a stronger leadership role. Balancing the need to take leadership with the desire to empower coauthors to lead was a constant negotiation during this initiative and one that other community engagement offices will need to anticipate if starting their own initiative.

Disrupting Silos

A primary aim of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative was to bring staff and faculty from across units and departments together with the shared mission of institutionalizing community engagement and building infrastructure to support, enhance, and assess this work. Early in the initiative, it became clear that deliberately creating time and opportunities to break down communication silos across university units was crucial for achieving these shared goals. Participants spoke positively about both the opportunity to collaborate with people from different parts of campus they may not have otherwise met, and the sense of camaraderie that developed while working together on the shared topic of community engagement. The creation of interdisciplinary working groups facilitated cross-unit collaboration and helped disrupt traditional boundaries between departments and offices. For instance, one strategy that proved successful in breaking silos was the "lightning round" presentation format, where each working group member shared their unit's experiences on the topic at hand. These brief (3–5 minutes) presentations allowed participants to learn from each other's lived experiences,

share best practices, and discover ongoing initiatives or projects they might not have been aware of. This practice was incorporated into two working groups' monthly meetings, contributing to an environment of trust and open communication while setting the stage for future cross-unit collaborations.

Additionally, the combination of virtual meetings with an in-person retreat resonated well with members, as the retreat offered a valuable opportunity to strengthen relationships. In a time when many gatherings are virtual, incorporating in-person opportunities can significantly change the collective dynamic. Despite the busy schedules of these university faculty and staff, these meeting strategies enabled group members to develop trust and rapport, critical elements in the collective impact framework.

PSE as Backbone and Boundary Spanner

PSE staff operated as a backbone organization for the initiative by providing support for working group meetings, coordinating communication across participating units, and guiding overall vision and strategy. In parallel, it became evident that PSE staff were also serving as institutional boundary spanners throughout the initiative. Sometimes referred to as "third space" professionals, boundary spanners act as bridges between disparate units across the university as well as between the university and the broader community, facilitating interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaborations (Ramaley, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010; Whitchurch, 2015).

In the context of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative, PSE primarily fulfilled the role of internal engagement advocate, connecting various university units through working group meetings and fostering interdisciplinary dialogue. This case study builds upon and reaffirms emerging research exploring the role that engagement center staff can play in building boundary-spanning capacity through the collective impact organizational framework (DiEnno et al., 2024). It underscores the critical need for intentional strategies to overcome silos and for professionals like PSE staff who operate in the third space to foster lasting collaboration across multiple sectors. Future research might explore how the interplay between backbone structures and boundary spanners enhances the success of community-engaged initiatives and how these roles can

be supported to sustain meaningful institutional transformation.

Limitations

The findings of this study are specific to the context of a single R1 public university and reflect the unique dynamics, structures, and challenges inherent in such an institutional setting. Consequently, these findings are not generalizable to all institutions of higher education. Additionally, this study represents an initial exploration of the Catalyzing Impact Initiative, which remains in progress. The ongoing nature of the initiative means that certain long-term outcomes or broader impacts may not yet be evident. As mentioned, our case study participants included university faculty/staff and community partners from our working groups. However, to protect anonymity, we did not disaggregate responses based on participants' roles. Future research should explore the nuances of these roles, particularly the perspectives of community partners in contributing to institutional change within universities.

Another limitation lies in our positionality as researchers. As staff members directly affiliated with PSE, we approached this study as insiders, actively involved in the initiative's development and facilitation of working group meetings. Although this insider perspective provided valuable insights and access, it may also have introduced biases in interpreting the data. Future studies could incorporate external data collection and analysis to further assess the initiative's impacts.

Conclusion and Best Practices

This study explored how the collective impact framework can drive internal cultural and organizational change within higher education institutions. Specifically, it examined how collective impact principles can enhance university-wide community engagement, establishing infrastructure to incentivize and evaluate community-engaged teaching, learning, and research, and fostering greater accountability to community stakeholders. By applying collective impact to an internal culture change effort, the Catalyzing Impact Initiative showcases the transformative potential of cross-unit collaboration and boundary spanners while highlighting the unique challenges of navigating silos and entrenched hierarchies across campus and between the university and community part-

ners. To support others engaging in similar efforts, we close with some best practices for institutions and practitioners implementing collective impact initiatives.

Clarity, Transparency, and Roadmapping

Survey and focus group responses highlighted the overburdening of staff and faculty members. In response, PSE staff implemented strategies to increase communication of the initiative roadmap to help working group members keep track of progress and future directions of meetings. For example, we created a digital timeline visual to include in emails to the group, illustrating milestones and allowing group members to quickly reference their group's progress and upcoming topics of discussion. We also began explicitly connecting the tasks in each meeting agenda to a larger group goal or milestone through a verbal introductory period at the beginning of each group meeting, so that group members could more easily connect the meeting agenda with overall group progress. Although these modifications may seem minor, the midpoint survey demonstrated the importance of providing regular reminders and updates on group progress to accommodate busy group members. The results of the midpoint survey were shared with working group members, and the subsequent modifications were described by PSE staff, in the spirit of full transparency. These strategies are consistent with the backbone role in the collective impact framework, and also respond to the current realities of staff and faculty members who participate in multiple committees and initiatives across the university.

Assigning Key Members Versus Self-Motivated Members

Although PSE recommended participants for the working groups, the members were

ultimately appointed by the provost, and given a group charge that was drafted by PSE and approved by the provost. Leadership support was crucial to providing a sense of legitimacy and significance to the initiative, and ensured the participation of key faculty and staff members who were positioned to create culture change at the institutional level. However, the group members who were already committed to a community-engaged university demonstrated higher participation in meetings and a commitment to future participation in the initiative's efforts long term, crucial to the sustainability of the initiative's goals. Thus, limiting the number of assigned members within a working group may be more strategic. Although assigning participants may be necessary to ensure that key positions are filled, overloading a group with assigned participants could lower overall commitment and impede progress. In future initiatives, university public impact offices may consider the group dynamics relevant to their initiative and encourage self-motivated individuals to populate the majority of group membership, assigning only a few key positions with the power to carry forward initiative goals to leadership and promote broader institutional change.

In conclusion, the Catalyzing Impact Initiative highlights both the potential and challenges of applying the collective impact framework to higher education institutional change. Although the framework is valuable for university initiatives, its effectiveness depends on considering institutional culture, addressing participant capacity, and breaking down silos that hinder collaboration. This adaptation provides important insights into how institutions can prioritize internal transformation to enhance community engagement.



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