Collaborating to Create Community-Driven Educational Attainment Outcomes

This model of collaboration leans heavily on the
Collective Impact Model of FSG and Strategic Doing™ by Ed Morrison.
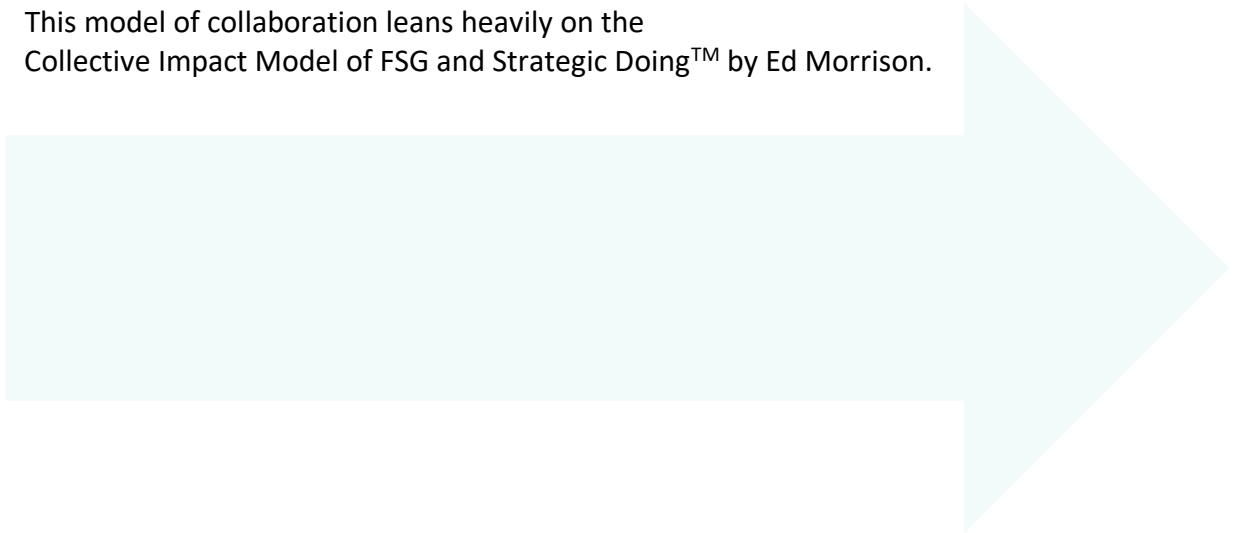
Chapter 1. WHAT IS OUR APPROACH TO CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION, AND WHY DOES IT WORK?

Many challenges facing our communities are too big for any single organization or sector to tackle alone. Instead, it takes the knowledge, networks, assets, and tools of multiple organizations working across sectors to create meaningful and scalable change to move the needle toward progress.

Since its inception in 2017, the ncIMPACT Initiative at the UNC School of Government has led cross-sector collaboratives in communities across North Carolina. The work started with the Opioid Response Project, launched in 2018, which convened 10 teams to focus on the opioid epidemic in their communities. Next, in partnership with myFutureNC, ncIMPACT led 15 Local Educational Attainment Collaboratives to increase the number of individuals in North Carolina with postsecondary degrees, credentials, or certificates that can lead to valuable work opportunities. Most recently, as part of a pan-University effort, the ncIMPACT Initiative launched a two-year program to connect young adults to living wage employment opportunities. This initiative leads 13 cross-sector teams representing 37 counties in North Carolina.

This toolkit offers a step-by-step overview of ncIMPACT's innovative and proven approach to cross-sector collaboration that can be used to address a wide range of challenges across diverse communities.

The Key Ingredients

ncIMPACT's approach includes five main elements: our vision, our reality, our framework for change, our measures of progress, and our sustainability.

The work is informed by both Strategic Doing™ and the Collective Impact Model (Kania and Kramer, 2011). By blending aspects of these approaches, ncIMPACT has created a model that harnesses the strengths and benefits of collaboration with a fast-paced, iterative, action-oriented process to foster meaningful, sustainable change.

Our Vision (the inspiration) – Development of a powerful guiding statement of the challenge being addressed and the shared community goal.

Our Reality (the brutal honesty) – Development of a collaborative agenda that includes additional specificity of the challenge, acknowledges embedded equity issues, identifies a framing question that inspires action, states the high-level goal, and establishes standards for how the collaborative will work together.

Our Framework for Change (the heart of the action) – Creation of an action plan with working groups that leverage the strengths of individual members, organizations, and perspectives.

Our Measures (tracking the progress) - Identifying and tracking data to monitor activities' progress and inform learning and decision-making.

Our Sustainability (the continuity that leads to lasting, long-term impact) - Identifying and leveraging ongoing funding support and local champions to continue building, maintaining, and adapting the efforts over time.

Guiding the work at every step is a steering committee comprised of leaders with expertise in collective impact, collaboration, evaluation, subject matter knowledge, lived experience, and community/context-specific knowledge.

1.1 Cross-Sector Collaboration Our Approach Model

The chapters in this toolkit dive deeper into these elements and highlight specific examples from previous cross-sector collaborations.

This model is premised on the following insights:

1. Collaboratives often overperform when they are part of a cohort with other collaboratives
2. The peer learning among cohorts can be a powerful motivator and source of information
3. The process of building an effective and sustainable collaborative takes 3-5 years

Before engaging in cross-sector collaboration, communities should be aware of the following questions:

How is this model implemented?

Communities are increasingly looking to launch cross-sector collaboratives in efforts to combat significant challenges such as food insecurity, the opioid epidemic, and education disparities. Why? The short answer is that these challenges are too complex for any single individual, organization, or even sector to solve alone. Sometimes referred to as "wicked problems," addressing these challenges requires a wide range of expertise from diverse stakeholders in the non-profit, for-profit, and government sectors.

Is there one type of cross-sector collaboration process?

There is sometimes a misconception that cross-sector collaboration processes yield cookie-cutter experiences and outcomes for communities. Nothing could be farther from the truth. First, each community will come to the table with its own goals for outcomes. The collaborative process builds connections and trust among stakeholders who value both their community's history and its current context. This makes the processes and strategies they employ unique for each community.

Is cross-sector collaboration always a better approach?

Collaboration among sectors to try to solve complex and multi-layered challenges continues to grow as communities recognize the potential to create meaningful change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw several collaborative vaccine distribution efforts offered by the private, public, and non-profit sectors. These different community sectors created collaboratives to develop a common strategy and implemented it using mutually reinforcing activities and consistent communication.

Different theoretical frameworks vary in the conditions for success that they highlight. However, all include essential components such as regular communication, building trust, having shared goals, and an understanding of "who is doing what." For collaboratives to be successful, they must have a plan and the resources to tackle their complex challenges.

Because collaboratives are such hard work, communities must carefully consider whether to engage in them, even when facing a complex challenge. Here is our checklist of early questions. If the answer to any of them is "no," we advise against a cross-sector collaborative process.

- Are you facing a problem no single sector can effectively address?
- Do you have some general agreement among stakeholders about the nature of the problem?
- Are there people who will serve as persistent champions for the process?
- Does trust exist among stakeholders, or will you be able to build it?
- Is there capacity to coordinate the work of the collaborative?

What can my community expect when engaging in cross-sector collaborations?
These collaboratives bring together diverse groups from various sectors. Including perspectives from diverse sectors within a community or region can lead to workable solutions.

Shared accountability among these organizations and groups can allow for shared risk. This shared risk can help foster an environment of creativity as stakeholders can take collective risk without all the blame being placed on one organization or group if it is unsuccessful.

Collaboration also allows for an exchange of knowledge, assets, and networks, or social capital. Social capital refers to connections, networks, or relationships among people and the value that arises from them. Each individual and organization has social capital with their own connections. When you bring multiple individuals and organizations together in a collaborative, they can reap the benefits of each other's shared social capital. Relationships forged within the collaborative can last beyond their work together, increasing their collective long-term social capital.

References
Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Link

Chapter 2. HOW DO WE SET A VISION AND A SHARED SENSE OF OUR REALITY?

Crafting a Vision Statement

In the ncIMPACT process, we wait to create the vision after determining the current context, or **Our Reality**, which we call the first phase. This is because we find that community teams need to grapple through a shared understanding of the substance and scale of their challenge before they can construct a meaningful vision statement. Without that shared understanding, vision statements are often too lofty. For example, one community working on increasing the number of people with post-secondary credentials came into our process having already determined that their vision was: "To create a community where all people thrive." That is a laudable goal, but people can thrive without having post-secondary credentials and, in the alternative, may fail to thrive even though they have post-secondary credentials. The team stopped to consider their reality and wrestled through the data behind the challenge. They realized that their work was really about upskilling their labor force to qualify them for the types of jobs being introduced in the local labor market, and the vision statement needed to communicate that more clearly.

What is a vision statement?

A shared vision has been defined "as a common mental model of the future state of the team or its tasks that provides the basis for action within the team" (Pearce and Ensley, 2004, p. 260–261). It is a distinct picture of the future because of the collaborative team's work. Developing this picture clarifies the direction for community change across sectors (Hoyle, 2007). ncIMPACT's work with community teams indicates that the vision helps leaders to become inspired and committed to a shared goal. It is a strong driving force for ongoing and systematic change because it energizes the group, creating an emotional contagion atmosphere of optimism (Boyatzis et al., 2015).

The shared vision is also a reality check that signals to everyone that the end state will only be reached through the work of a cross-sector collaborative. Think of it as both the art and science required to capture both the attention and imagination of others, getting them primed and ready to co-create something as part of a collaborative because they understand no one institution can deliver on the goal.

Visions need to be more than aspirational. They need to be attainable. If they are not tempered by realistic notions about team capacity, they may overload members of the collaborative by asking them to do more than is feasible. When the vision is unattainable, the individuals who are supposed to turn it into reality will become frustrated and demotivated.

How do you create a vision statement?

- Identify other visioning efforts by revisiting the inventory of earlier community initiatives. Make connections as needed.

- Design the visioning process and select a facilitator. The facilitator should possess strong facilitation skills and be perceived as neutral and fair.

- Conduct the visioning process. Participants should identify their shared vision by looking into the future. Also, address the identification of standards of engagement/common values.

- Formulate the vision statement and standards of engagement/common values based on the results of the sessions.

- Test the statement with others in the community to ensure it feels authentic to the community and that others will want to invest in it.

- Develop goals, objectives, and measures to understand what it will take to achieve the vision and know if your community is progressing. These aspects of the process will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

What are some tools we can use to help us?

Interactive workshopping with your team can help you craft your vision statement, standards of engagement, and goals together.

Worksheets and other physical resources that inspire creativity within the team can be particularly useful.
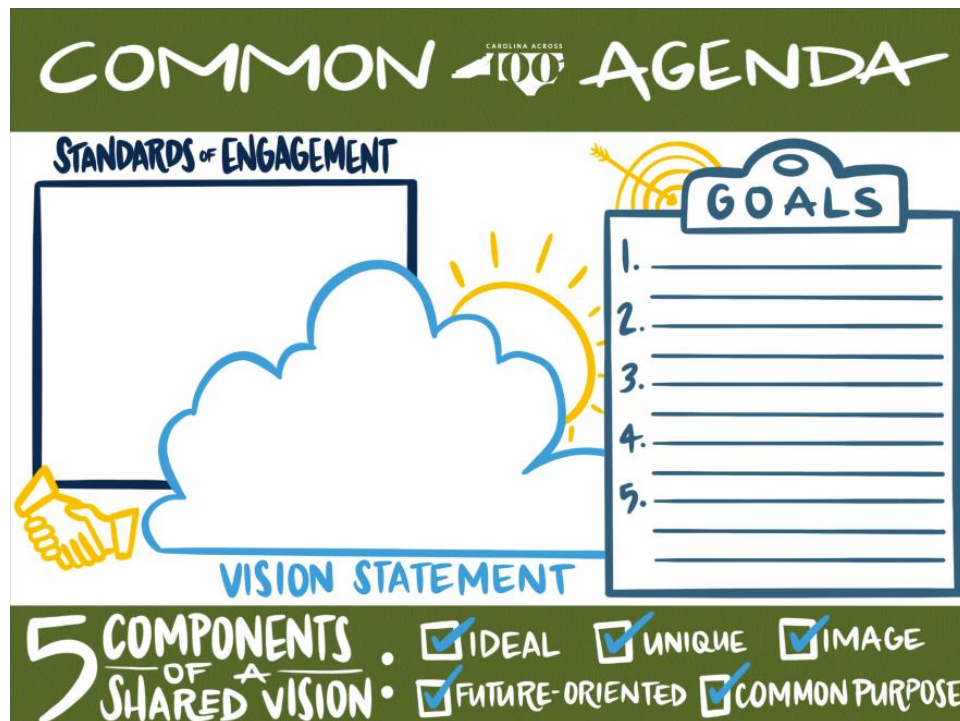
DEVELOPING OUR GOALS

GOAL: [   ]

WHAT RESOURCES DO WE HAVE TO HELP ACHIEVE THIS GOAL?

WHAT RESOURCES DO WE NEED TO HELP ACHIEVE THIS GOAL?

WHAT ACTIVITIES + ACTIONS SUPPORT THIS GOAL?

CAROLINA ACROSS 100

The following tool can be effective in identifying differences of opinion within the group and help move folks to a place of consensus:

Scale of Agreement

Rate your individual level of support for this idea/topic/issue. We're using a spectrum to gauge support, not a vote of YES or NO.

a	b	c	d
Full support or agreement with the proposal.	Agreement with most aspects of the proposal, and, despite continued concerns with some elements, willingness to go along with the proposal.	Significant concerns or outright disagreement with some or all elements of the proposal, but will not oppose the action or decision ("standing aside").	Continued strong disagreement with the proposal

✓ If all members of the group are at levels a-c, then there is some degree of consensus.

Nature of disagreements?

• Minor concerns with wording or editing.

• Agreement with the main thrust of the proposal, but concerns with specific elements which, if changed, would lead to agreement.

• Major concerns: principles disagreement with the overall direction of the proposal, which if not addressed, would lead the member to block the consensus (level D).

Source: Hustedde, Smutko, and Kapsa, *Turning Lemons into Lemonade* (n.d.)

What will help you move further into the green?

Adapted from Peg Carlson's and John Steven's "Facilitation Skills" Training, March 8th, 2022

Who needs to be involved, and how?

- **Core Team** — designs the visioning process, works with the facilitator, prepares for the visioning sessions, records the session results, and drafts the resulting vision and values statements.
- **Steering Committee** — oversees the visioning process and solicits community participation.
- **Broader Community** — weighs in on the visioning. This sets the tone for broad participation

throughout the process.

What are some examples in action?
The examples below demonstrate how a community refined their vision statement over time:

- **First round:** *Provide a pathway for young adults in X County to achieve their educational and career goals*

- **Second round:** *Increase the number of happy, healthy, gainfully employed Opportunity Youth (aged 16-24 not working or in school) in X County*

After the core team crafted their first version of this vision statement, they took it back to their larger team and community. After discussion and revision, their second version includes greater specificity about their vision, as they redefined a "pathway" to employment as increasing the number of "happy, healthy, gainfully employed Opportunity Youth."

How is the vision connected to the work ahead?
A vision provides orientation and meaning for community collaboratives. It evokes emotion and helps collaborative members to focus their energies. When teams keep the vision front and center, it also helps to challenge the entire process. If strategies and objectives are inconsistent or not well tailored to the vision, team members will question them.

Standards of Engagement
Standards of engagement are the agreed-upon values that guide the group in laying out the rest of the common agenda, making decisions, and how the group will work together overall. Setting engagement standards is an important phase early in establishing a community collaborative, as these agreements define how the collaborative team will work together and with the larger community.

How do you set standards of engagement?
- Examine your shared values for how you want to engage with each other and others in the community

- Draw on practices for collaboration that have worked well in your community

- Consider how the values and practices you have identified will inform the way your team assigns roles and responsibilities, communicates, makes decisions, and resolves conflict

- Set the "standards of engagement" in writing

- Be willing to hold each other accountable for the standards

What are some examples in action?
Below is a list of shared principles taken from "[Eight Ground Rules for Great Meetings](#)"
(Schwarz 2016):

- State views and ask genuine questions. This enables the team to shift from monologues and arguments to a conversation in which members can understand everyone's point of view and be curious about the differences in their views.

- Share all relevant information. This enables the team to develop a comprehensive, common information set to solve problems and make decisions.

- Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean. This ensures that all team members use the same words to mean the same thing.

- Explain reasoning and intent. This enables members to understand how others reached their conclusions and see where team members' reasoning differs.

- Focus on interests, not positions. By moving from arguing about solutions to identifying needs that must be met to solve a problem, you reduce unproductive conflict and increase your ability to develop solutions to which the full team is committed.

- Test assumptions and inferences. This ensures the team makes decisions with valid information rather than with members' private stories about other team members' beliefs and motives.

- Jointly design the next steps. This ensures that everyone is committed to moving forward together as a team.

- Discuss undiscussable issues. This ensures that the team addresses the important but undiscussed issues hindering its results, which can only be resolved in a team meeting.

How are standards of engagement connected to the work ahead?
We encourage teams to continually go back to the standards of engagement to determine if how they engage with each other and members of the community is consistent with what they have said is important. Teams can use the standards of engagement to assess meetings. An audit every six months is often helpful to assess engagement with each other.

Who is Missing?
One of the key functions of a community collaborative is identifying and bringing in stakeholders from throughout the community. These partnerships can help ensure that collaboratives are responsive to the community's needs and can leverage the community's assets and resources.

Many groups already working across sectors and diverse organization types mistakenly think they don't need to work through this exercise. They invariably find they are wrong. This exercise requires revising regularly as the context and challenge change. Throughout the life of your community collaborative, you will want to be intentional about widening the circles and making more connections.

How do you identify who is missing?

2.2 Who Is Missing Activity Description

While your collaboratives are already working across sectors and diverse organization types, we want to help continue to widen the circles and make more connections.

As a group, brainstorm to ask, **"Who is not yet at the table for our collaborative effort"?**

1. What other voices need to be present and considered as you continue doing your work?

2. How might you begin to connect with these individuals or groups?

Who is Thriving?

It is important to document successes and learn from what has worked in the past before launching collaborative work. In this activity, we ask you to find and tell stories of thriving, including those whose backgrounds, experiences, or demographic characteristics represent the targeted groups of people the system or systems (e.g., education, healthcare, social services) tend to leave behind. We want to know about instances when institutions, programs, or people came together to support community members' journeys.

How do you identify stories of thriving?

2.3 A Local Story of Thriving Activity Description with Example.

Danny's Story: After losing his dream job working under a Michelin-star chef, Danny Braddy of Mecklenburg knew he needed to find new opportunities to provide for his wife and child. After connecting with Men of Destiny, he completed the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)-10 certification and began heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and facilities maintenance training. He shared that after becoming unemployed during the pandemic, it was hard to imagine doing anything other than what he was used to. However, Men of Destiny opened his eyes to new opportunities and avenues to provide for his family. He shared that although his current work feels like "a 360" from his culinary studies, he's excited for this opportunity to ***"start at the bottom, learn as much as he can, and use each opportunity as a stepping stone."***
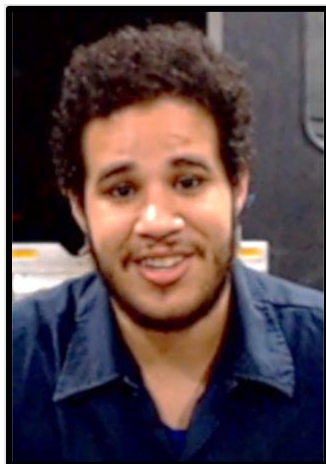
References

Boyatzis, R. E., Rochford, K., & Taylor, S. N. (2015). The role of the positive emotional attractor in vision and shared vision: Toward effective leadership, relationships, and engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 670. Link

Hoyle, J. R. (2007). Leadership and futuring: Making visions happen (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Pearce, C. L., & Ensley, M. D. (2004). A reciprocal and longitudinal investigation of the innovation process: The central role of shared vision in product and process innovation teams (PPITs). *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25(2), 259-278. Link
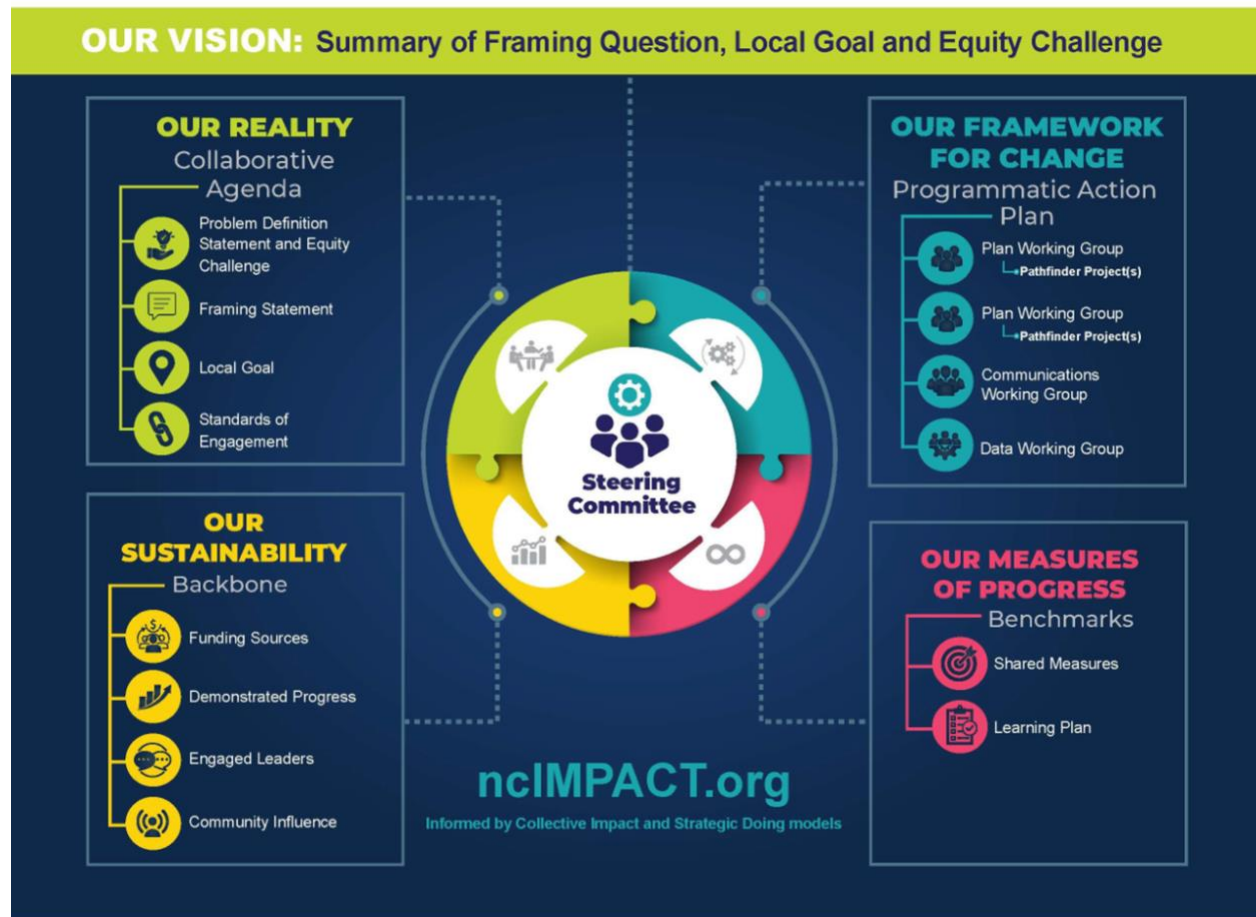
Schwarz, R. (2016, June). 8 Ground Rules for Great Meetings. *Harvard Business Review.* Link

Appendix with Resources and Tools

Chapter 1 Resources

1.1 "Our Approach to Cross-Sector Collaboration" Model

Chapter 2 Resources

2.1 Visioning Exercise

Visioning Exercise

During this exercise, participants break off into their collaborative teams to craft their vision statements.

Visioning Exercise (Breakouts)

A vision statement is about ideal conditions or how things would look if the issue important to you were completely and perfectly addressed. Common characteristics of vision statements:

1. Easily understood and shared by members of the community
2. Broad enough to include a variety of local perspectives
3. Inspiring and uplifting to everyone involved in your effort
4. Easy to communicate

Instructions

1. Identify one person to take notes while the group shares ideas of what came up for them during the large group exercise.
2. Ask the following questions, record key points, and discuss common themes.
   1. *Essential why*: What is the dream or ideal that you and your community seek?
   2. *Essential what*: What would have to change for this dream to come true?
3. Come to a tentative agreement about potential vision statement(s) by considering the following:
   1. Will it draw people to the common work?
   2. Does it give hope for a better future?
   3. Will it inspire community members through positive, effective action?
   4. Does it provide a basis for developing the other aspects of your action-planning process?
4. Record the drafted agreed-upon statement(s) on your handout to take back to your community team. Note: It is suggested that this activity be done with your broader group.

Vision Statements

2.2 Who Is Missing Activity Description

Activity 2.2: Who is Missing?

While your teams may already be working across sectors and diverse organization types, you will want to intentionally widen the circles and make more connections.

As a group, brainstorm to ask, **"Who is not yet at the table for our collaborative effort?"**

3. What other voices need to be present and considered as you continue doing your work?
4. How might you begin to connect with these individuals or groups?

2.3 A Local Story of Thriving Activity Description with Example

Activity 2.2: A Local Story of Thriving Activity

At the outset of the first "Our State, Our Work" forum, collaborative teams were asked to create a short video capturing the story of a young adult who either is or was at high risk for becoming an Opportunity Youth. We called these videos "Stories of Thriving."

These stories allowed teams to center the voice of a young person in their community who had defied the odds. They were personal and powerful accounts of experiences in each young person's own words. Their stories stood as a testament to the trusting relationships the community organizations that are part of OSOW's community teams have formed with people in their programs.

They also prompted teams to identify the supports that led to these individuals' success and consider ways to provide more young people with such resources. The stories were our first attempt to have teams learn directly from the very population they hope to support.
We are deeply grateful to those who shared their journey with us. We hope that, alongside our community teams, we can take these individual "stories of thriving" and create systems-level programming across the state that creates accessible on-ramps to education and employment.

DESCRIPTION
It is important to document successes and learn from what has worked in the past before launching collaborative work. In this activity, we ask you to find and tell stories of thriving, including those whose backgrounds, experiences, or demographic characteristics represent the targeted groups of people the system or systems (e.g., education, healthcare, social services)

tend to leave behind. We want to know about times when institutions, programs, or people came together to support community members' journeys.

What did this thriving look like, and what can we learn from it?

For example, in our work on Opportunity Youth, we asked teams to:

1

IDENTIFY 4-6 community members ages 16 to 24 years old who are thriving today in full, fulfilling work.

2

CONDUCT 15-20 MINUTE INTERVIEWS with a subset of 3 or more community members on your list. You can use our Critical Questions, below, to get started and it often helps to record (with permission, of course):

-Please state your name and the date.

-Tell me a little about the path you took to arrive at your current employment position.

-What barriers or challenges did you face in getting where you are today?

-Please describe any of the programs, places, or people who helped you along the way?

Want more tips? Click here.

3

SELECT ONE STORY TO HIGHLIGHT

To help with this, you may want to consider some selection criteria. For example, try ranking stories by:

a) IMPACT
b) ACTIONABILITY–from most to least, with the most actionable being those that provide lessons for designing scalable solutions
c) EQUITY–from most to least, with the most equity-focused featuring people the system tends to leave behind; and
d) SYSTEMIC–from most to least, with the most representing instances when different parts of the system(s) worked well.

Use your rankings to select one story.

4

VIDEO RECORD a conversation with your selected community member.

-Be sure you have the storyteller's permission and share with them why you are doing this activity.

-Videos should briefly highlight barriers and what helped this person stay on (or get back on) track.

-The focus is on what worked and/or what went right so that we can learn from that and support and expand those elements.

-Please be sure to include your collaborative's team name in the introduction.

Stories of Thriving

The Assets
1. Opportunities for skilled trades that allow for stable employment after completing their GED, apprenticeship program, or participating in WIOA.

2. A caring mentor or advocate who provides ongoing encouragement and helps them navigate through the systems.

3. Financial support to make ends meet while pursuing their dreams.

The Opportunity
Many expressed a strong desire to pursue further education, share their story to inspire others, start programs that help their communities, and be successful business owners.