What Gets Measured, Gets Done:
Setting Measurable Goals for Your Partnership Programs

For partnership leaders, the subject of measurement and evaluation can be an uncomfortable one. Some may care more about intangible measures of performance, such as personal observations of student engagement, or they may be more invested in how the partnership works (the process) than in what the partnership produces (the outcomes). Meanwhile, those who work directly with students may be skeptical of the value of the data being collected (as is often the case with standardized testing), or whether it will be used at all.

However, by not tracking outcomes and assessing your impact, you run the risk of working very hard on the wrong things, with nothing to show for your efforts, not to mention alienating partners who want to see results for all their efforts.

Intentional program design

All too often, partnership initiatives are inspired by an interest in working with children, with outcomes as an afterthought. For example, a civic group may want to form a partnership to focus on reading to elementary age children, believing that this will lead to improved student reading skills or a greater appreciation of literature. Or a museum might launch a 'trunk show' to engage children in various scientific fields.

These seem to be worthwhile concepts, and it's fine to begin the program development process with models like these in mind. But if you don't set measurable goals and track relevant data, you'll have no way of knowing whether your efforts are paying off.

What partnerships need to do, in other words, is create programs designed to reach measurable goals that are shared by all partners. Partnership sponsors need to think about measurable outcomes as early as possible and whenever feasible, set up data collection processes as they design the new intervention. If you don't have accurate baseline data before you start the new activity, it will be difficult to demonstrate that your activity is what actually made the difference.

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Take the reading partnership as an example. If the partners are to create a logic model to drive their initiative, they must first decide on their primary goal. In the process, they will begin to lay out the criteria by which their work can be judged.

Their initial goal, "to improve student reading skills," is not specific enough: it does not describe a firm end point, but rather indicates that any improvement in reading skills is a success. (For example, a student who advances two months in reading ability would be considered successful even if he started two years behind.) Goals that focus on undefined progress allow partners to call any improvement a success, no matter how minor. They allow partners to pursue any approach, rather than seek out the models that will help children make the gains they need.

Partners should instead develop a goal that clearly describes the desired end state; this way, all parties can share an understanding of what success looks like, even if they haven't yet identified how to get there. For our example, this might be that "all children in the program will read at grade level." Notice that this goal paints a clear picture of the objective that everyone can understand, and that it points to one or more criteria by which it can be measured.

If the stated end goal does not explicitly lay out measurable criteria, program designers must add that information. For example, if our civic group wished instead to instill a love of literature into each participating student, they would have to define what they meant: it could be based on the number of books each student read, or on a post-program survey of participants to gauge their attitudes about literature.

Setting a challenging but realistic goal may be difficult and will require research as to what expectations are realistic. For example, for the child two or three years behind in reading level, getting up to grade level in one year may not be realistic. A better goal might be "for all children to reach grade level or at least achieve a year and a half's growth during a one year period." Or if attendance is a problem, 100 percent daily attendance may not be realistic, but increasing from an average of 88 percent to 93 percent might be a challenging but achievable goal.

Evaluation metrics should be objective and independent. Ask students how well they read, for example, and you are likely to get rosier data than if you gave them an independent test. Ask program leaders to evaluate the performance of the students they've worked with for the past several months, and many students are likely to be graded upwards out of affinity, 'extra points for effort,' and as a vote of confidence in their own ability as mentors or instructors. While understandable, none of this helps you in your efforts.

With a concrete, measurable goal in mind, your next two decisions will focus on how, exactly, you want to measure success; and then, what interim measurements you can track to gauge progress towards your master goal. In terms of your top measurable goals, you can work with measurements already being taken (such as using student attendance data, proficiency scores, or graduation rates), or come up with your own scheme (pre/post assessments to measure interest, number of students participating in clubs or competitions, etc.). The keys here are to collect objective and relevant data, and to do so using criteria that all partners have agreed to.

In terms of tracking interim progress, think about what milestones you want to see as students progress towards your master goal. If you want to see grade-level proficiency, track their improvement through

monthly assessments; if you want to see 95% attendance, track it weekly or monthly and help students see whether they're on track for year-end success.

No matter what you and your partners decide to do, make sure that your outcomes can be, and will be, measured. There is no better way to show your partners that you're making a real difference together, which in turn is the best way to turn them into long-term supporters and advocates for your work.

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