

Collaborative Network Analysis

Using Social Network Analysis to Explore Strategy-Focused Engagement



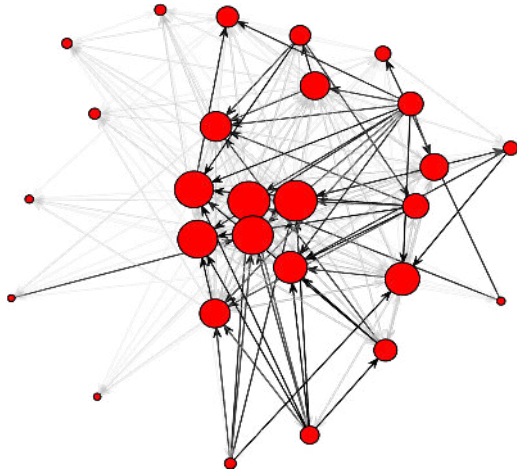
Identifying essential community partners and engaging them in assessing their communities, sharing resources, fundraising, and developing and implementing strategies are fundamental Collaborative tasks.

Your Collaborative is a network of partners working together on these and other activities. So, mapping the relationships among members is critical to understand how the process works—and to enhance your Collaborative's effectiveness in accomplishing its objectives.

Cooperative and Coordinated Engagement, part two in this three-part series on social network analysis, explores how the degree to which Collaborative partners contribute resources connects to overall level and type of partner engagement. Any thriving Collaborative requires highly engaged members to contribute resources, skills, energy, and leadership.

This edition of *Evaluation Snapshot* applies data from a 2017 social network analysis in Washington County to demonstrate how to use this process to explore intentional engagement among partners working together as a strategy team focused on a single desired outcome—childhood obesity prevention.

Social network analysis examines interactions among Collaborative partners to help us better understand and expand on connections that affect systems of services. This process helps Collaboratives visualize, dissect, and analyze the quantity, quality, and strength of member interactions.



This chart illustrates how a strategy team fits within the overall Collaborative network, showing connections among partners of Family Connection & Communities In Schools of Washington County.

- High-engagement connections are joined by black lines if at least one partner in a pair works a great deal with a second partner on the strategy, and the second partner in the pair works a fair amount, or a great deal, with the first on the strategy.
- Gray lines connect Collaborative members not involved in work on the strategy.
- Partners represented by larger red dots have multiple connections to the overall Collaborative network, while partners represented by smaller dots have fewer connections.

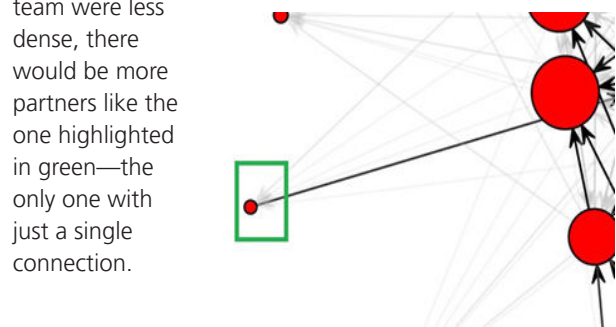
Partners close to the center of the Collaborative network all have at least one connection to the strategy team. Partners with the most connections always appear closer to the center, which shows that the Collaborative's most well-connected partners in Washington County are all members of this strategy team.

Connections within the strategy team extend beyond the well-connected partners at the center, fanning out to the edge of the Collaborative network and reaching several partners with fewer connections. These partners that on the surface appear relatively isolated from the rest of the Collaborative are heavily engaged with the strategy team.



In Candler County, three community churches sponsor the Backpack Blessings program to support the school success strategy, but do not otherwise participate in the Collaborative's work. These partners often provide specialized resources and support—and can connect the team to external partners not yet networking with other Collaborative partners or participating in the strategy.

Most partners on the strategy team, like Washington County's Collaborative network, have more than one connection. The network's density increases with the number of each partner's connections, and networks with higher density are more cohesive than those that are sparse. The network's density in Washington County indicates that the diverse partners are well integrated. If the strategy team were less dense, there



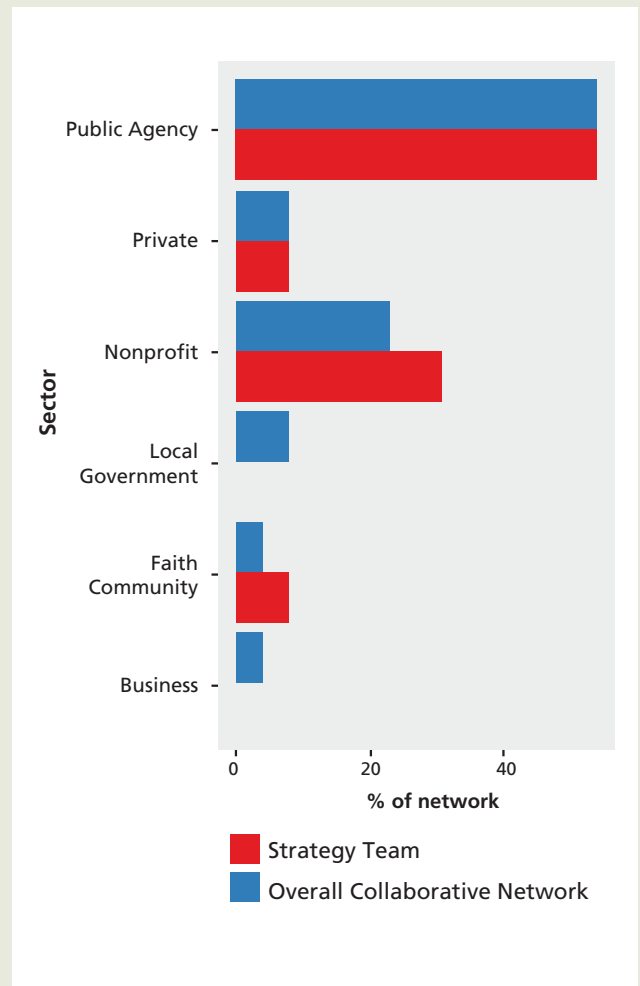
would be more partners like the one highlighted in green—the only one with just a single connection.

Partners isolated from the wider network could reveal issues with communication, trust, or a tendency to work alone instead of as a team. It could also reflect issues at the Collaborative level, such as budget constraints. However, it's also possible that the partner may be engaged in a different kind of work, such as providing expertise in a specific type of support or contributing resources to more strategy-focused partners.

For example, Gilmer County's *Times-Courier* newspaper includes articles about Collaborative meetings and advertises Collaborative events free of charge. So instead of directly supporting strategies in the Annual Plan, this partner provides communication support and resources that highlight other partners' work.

Network graphics tell only part of the story. Using existing knowledge of how partners work together, your Collaborative should carefully examine whether an isolated partner signals a problem with partner engagement or if you're overlooking a potentially valuable connection between two partners. Using network graphics in conjunction with existing knowledge about Collaborative functioning can help highlight ways to address partnerships to boost engagement.

This bar graph shows the percentage of partners represented by sector in the Collaborative and on the strategy team. Because only some partners are on the team, some sectors have greater or lesser representation compared to the overall network. Washington County has a higher percentage of faith community partners on the team, while no partners from local government or the business community are represented. Yet, they may be valuable partners in implementing a strategy. In Rockdale County, the Chamber of Commerce is one of the key partners putting into action the Collaborative's efforts to strengthen assets in youth.



Your Collaborative is in the best position to judge whether your strategy has the appropriate composition of partners in place to reach its goals. If other team members are needed in Washington County, Collaborative partners could refer to the network chart to identify partners to engage.

What the Washington County Collaborative Has Taught Us About Strategic Engagement

Social networks can help us explore gaps in strategic engagement while also illustrating what Collaboratives are doing well. This evaluation technique illustrates how specific partners work together on strategy teams focused on specific outcomes. Here's what we learned about how Family Connection & Communities In Schools of Washington County engages partners in strategy building:

A fusion of well-connected partners and partners with fewer connections ensures that the Collaborative's strategy team engages well-connected partners while drawing on the resources partners with fewer connections bring to the table.

Diverse sectors from the Collaborative network participate on the strategy team—but not all sectors. This is appropriate if these sectors aren't relevant to the strategy team's work. If the sectors could be helpful but aren't engaged,

comparisons like those in the bar graph can help get the desired sectors involved. The ways to build a strategy team vary, and examining your Collaborative network upfront establishes a solid foundation.

Most sectors from the Collaborative are represented on the strategy team. Partners also appear to delegate some strategy work outside the central group of well-connected partners, reaching out for input to those not as fully

engaged. This is a primary example of Georgia Family Connection's disciplined approach to collaboration, because it avoids an overly centralized decision-making process dominated by a few key players.

Well-connected partners and those with fewer connections to the overall network are all valuable members of the strategy team. Several partners that may appear relatively isolated from the rest of the Collaborative are heavily engaged on the strategy team. They can provide indispensable support and resources and bring external partners to the team.

Engage the Right Partners and Establish Essential Connections

Understanding social network analysis can help you better understand your Collaborative partner engagement. Just as the Evaluation, Results, and Accountability Team promotes both evaluation activities and evaluative thinking, social network analysis offers formal social network understanding at the local level, as well as "social analysis thinking."

These findings helped the coordinator in Washington County reach out to Collaborative members to ensure that they have opportunities to connect to strategy teamwork and other activities. For example, although local government is not represented on the strategy team, that

partner played a key role in implementing a community farmers market—a key program of the strategy.

Take what you've learned about using social network analysis in this edition of Evaluation Snapshot to examine your own strategy teams and partners. Who's involved and what patterns of connections emerge? Which patterns represent strengths, and which reveal missing pieces?

As strengths and potential weaknesses emerge, think about how to use the strengths and existing connections to reach the missing partners and sectors. Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) can provide technical assistance to outline a plan to ensure that you're engaging the right partners and establishing essential connections so that strategy teams are focused on arriving at the desired outcomes.



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PARTNERSHIP

What we at Georgia Family Connection do is vital, because everything we do is aimed at improving conditions and prospects of families in every community across the state. We work toward measurably better outcomes for all Georgians. *Evaluation Snapshot* examines how collaboration among our partners affects indicators of child, family, and community well-being. Snapshots are taken from reports by the GaFCP Outcomes Team, a group of researchers from EMSTAR Research, Metis Associates, Georgia State University, and GaFCP.

GaFCP is a public-private nonprofit created and funded by the state of Georgia and investors from the private sector. We support Georgia Family Connection, a statewide network of Collaborative organizations in all 159 counties committed to improving the quality of life for children and families—the only one of its kind in the nation.

Please send questions or comments to Steve Erickson at eval@gafcp.org.

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