

Models *for* Local Infrastructure

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Every community has some infrastructure that supports nonprofit capacity building, and most are also connected with national infrastructure organizations that support their work.

Isolation doesn't serve nonprofits well—they need to know what's happening in their environments, learn from the mistakes and successes of others, and share in the effort to grow stronger in serving the community. Nonprofits also need to be able to access local resources for capacity building; and the providers of these resources need ways to reach out to nonprofits and funders, as well as to each other. Every community has some infrastructure that supports nonprofit capacity building, and most are also connected with national infrastructure organizations that support their work. But communities vary widely in how—and how well—this local infrastructure is coordinated.

While not every community has every type of capacity builder, the elements of a local infrastructure for nonprofit capacity building include the following:

- **Management Support Organizations** (MSOs) (urban ones like CompassPoint in San Francisco or Third Sector New England in Boston; or rural ones like the North Dakota Resource Center)
- **Consultants** (including both individuals and consulting firms)
- **Funders** (financial supporters of capacity building, including foundations, government agencies, public programs like United Way, and to a lesser extent corporations or individual donors)
- **Information Centers** (such as Foundation Center libraries)
- **Nonprofit Infrastructure Organizations** (such as state or regional nonprofit associations and grantmaker associations)

- **Nonprofit Management Higher Education Programs** (including those based in university nonprofit management centers)

- **Technology Resources** (organizations or consultants focused specifically on the technology needs of nonprofits)

- **Volunteer Centers** (groups that connect volunteers to nonprofits needing their services)

- **Financial Capacity Building Organizations** (such as loan funds)

- **Field-Specific Intermediaries** (such as community development corporations)

A more detailed breakout of these elements of local infrastructure is on the Web site of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (www.allianceonline.org) in the section, "Our Universe," and in a forthcoming research report about innovations in nonprofit capacity building (Backer, Bleeg & Groves, in press).

The infrastructure also includes nonprofit organization leaders who are willing and able to share information, advice, and skills with their peers. This informal element of the helping environment for nonprofits has always existed, but increasingly it is receiving more formal support through "peer networks" and related efforts.

The nonprofit capacity-building field is new enough so that these elements, as well as the "connective material" or infrastructure tying them together, are still being defined. Any community with a number of individuals and organizations providing capacity-building services is likely to have at least one network connecting some of them, and often there is more than one.

For instance, in Los Angeles, the oldest and

[Rochester
Effectiveness
Partnership's]
capacity-building
events and
consultations
have helped area
nonprofits acquire
both specific
evaluation skills and
a better conceptual
understanding
of how the
participatory process
and logic model
can help them.

best-established Management Support Organization is the Southern California Center for Nonprofit Management, through which many consultants and other players keep in touch. But there also are capacity-building providers that cluster around particular subject areas (e.g., poverty and social justice providers work with the Liberty Hill Foundation, a local funder in that area; and health-related providers opt for one of several major health conversion foundations doing grantmaking in this region) (Backer & Oshima, 2003). Somewhat similar situations exist in other communities, with one of the best-organized ones being the San Francisco Bay area (where communication, generally in the nonprofit sector, is far above the national average).

Models for Coordinating Local Infrastructure

As capacity building has grown in the last 15 years into a more formally organized element of the nonprofit sector (Backer, 2001), it has become apparent that networks for capacity building in many communities are not yet well-developed. The linkages between different elements has generally been weak, leading to a loss of potential synergy—badly needed, as always, in a resource-scarce environment. Following are some models for developing and operating a better-coordinated local infrastructure.

The Rochester Effectiveness Partnership (REP) in Rochester, NY, is completing eight years of formally organized work in 2004 (contact Beth Bruner, Bruner Foundation, brufound@eznet.net). REP has brought together funders, evaluators (with consultation led by national evaluation expert Anita Baker), and nonprofit service organizations to design, implement, and refine evaluation practice related to philanthropic grantmaking in the Rochester area. The first step was to convene a “funders summit” and a “nonprofit summit” to identify, from the point of view of each group, what is needed to help nonprofits do evaluation more effectively. The Bruner Foundation, the major funder of this collaboration, had previously conducted a project that searched nationally for innovations in evaluation practice, and thus it served as a resource for this effort.

REP's capacity-building events and consultations have helped area nonprofits acquire both specific evaluation skills and a better conceptual understanding of how the participatory process and logic model can help them. Parallel capacity-development activities for funders have helped foundations in the region understand how they can best use evaluation results to sharpen grantmaking. REP also developed, for evaluation, a “Rochester Logic Model,” which is now incorporated into a unified grant application form and process used by many local funders and nonprofits.

The Capacity-Building Network of Upstate New York (contact Jane Ellen Bleeg, Network Project Director, jellen@rochester.rr.com) aims to increase the effectiveness and impact of the nonprofit sector in Western and Central New York. More than 60 funders, nonprofits and capacity builders, operating within Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County, began work in 2002 to identify regional capacity-building needs and assets. Based on findings from this and a study of 18 capacity-building organizations around the country, a network has been designed to link and serve existing nonprofits, funders and capacity builders across the region. It will complement and build upon existing assistance already available in specific communities.

Regional services will include the following: standards of excellence and an assessment tool to help nonprofits identify and prioritize their needs for capacity building; e-mail discussion groups linking those with similar interests; a Web-based consultant directory, calendar of trainings, jobs listing, and other resources; and brokering/linking across the region. In addition, action plans developed in five communities are guiding the enhancements to local capacity building, with the exchange of resources and knowledge between communities being one key feature. Special projects, such as developing assistance for rural or grass-roots groups, may also be undertaken. Foundation and corporate grants, earned income, and contributions from individuals and organizations support this program. Evaluation is built into every aspect of the network. A report on the feasibility and transition work is available.

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