# Understanding Nonprofit Collaborations: A Case Study of Communities in Schools of North Texas and its Partner Organizations

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*The purpose of this study is to understand and categorize the diverse forms of collaborations, and explore the challenges of cross sector collaborations. To achieve these purposes, we analyze documentation of 132 collaborative partnerships of Communities in School of North Texas (CISNT), and conduct interviews with select partners of CISNT. Our results suggest that the nature of collaborations vary. Partnerships tend to be informal and resource sharing. The findings further indicate that nonprofits face challenges in the collaborative process including management of accountability and interorganizational communication.*

## Introduction

Collaboration in the nonprofit world is vital but very complex. In today's networked world, collaboration is encouraged and often required for nonprofit organizations to achieve social change (Jang, Feiock, & Satgalina, 2014; Provan & Milward, 2001; Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006; Sowa, 2009). As part of the nature of the nonprofit sector, collaboration is often motivated by organizational benefits and the pursuit of more innovative ways to serve clients and the community. Potential benefits of nonprofit collaboration include the reduction in service provision costs through economies of scale or scope of services, and the improved service capacity as well as high status gained from working with more established actors (Podolny, 1993; Feiock & Jang, 2009; Jang, Feiock, & Saitgalina, 2014; Guo & Acar, 2005; Gazley, 2008, 2010).

Despite the substantive and symbolic benefits of collaboration, the extant research presents an abstract depiction of nonprofit collaboration by only examining why nonprofits collaborate, and provides a limited understanding of the collaborative processes. Formal contract based collaboration, for example, is mainly discussed in the nonprofit literature, yet not all collaborative arrangements take this form. In some instances, collaboration is organized on an ad-hoc basis to respond to the immediate needs of actors and then dissolved once the purpose of collaboration is achieved or goes dormant until the need of collaboration occurs again. In this case the collaboration remains informal in nature to minimize potential drawback of formal collaborations (Jang, Feiock, & Satgalina, 2014; Guo & Acar, 2005; Gazley, 2008, 2010).

The presumption that collaboration is always good and without its challenges has been questioned, and a growing body of research calls attention to the dark side of collaboration (Smith & Lipsky, 1993; Michell 2013; Fosler, 2002; Erman & Uhlin, 2010; Shaw, 2003; Batley, 2011; Guo, 2007; Bennett & Savani, 2011). The challenges of collaboration ranges from loss of autonomy, high uncertainty in service delivery and cash flow, and lack of accountability that may eventually result in a tainted reputation and mission drift. To make real the advantages of collaboration, it is important to understand diverse forms of collaborations and potential challenges that may occur in various dimensions of collaborative processes because the benefits of collaboration do not appear without effective management of collaborations (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Milward &

Provan, 2006; Linden 2010; Forrer, Kee, & Boyer, 2014). The purpose of this research then is to analyze and categorize the diverse forms of nonprofit collaborations, and explore the challenges that nonprofit organizations face in the collaboration process. To fulfill this research purpose, we conduct a case study of Communities in Schools of North Texas (CISNT)—a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Texas—and its partner organizations from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. This paper proceeds as follows. First the nonprofit collaboration literature is presented and a theoretical understanding of challenges of collaboration is provided. Then the CISNT, the data case of this study is introduced. The review of 132 collaboration of CISNT is conducted and the findings from 10 interviews with partner agencies of CISNT is presented. Following a presentation of the findings, the theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed.

## Literature Review

### Collaboration Process

Collaboration is a dynamic process by which two or more organizations work towards mutual goals that they would otherwise be unable to accomplish alone (McGuire, 2006; Gazley, 2010). Collaboration research has been traditionally focused on three areas: 1) antecedents of collaboration, 2) collaboration process, and 3) collaboration outcomes (Wood & Gray, 1991; Thomson & Perry, 2006). The collaborative process, however, remains largely understudied in the public management literature. Exploring the collaboration processes or the "doing" part of collaboration is important because it sheds light on *how* organizations work together to accomplish mutual goals and objectives as well as the challenges that they encounter in this collective effort. Thomson and Perry (2006) identify five dimensions of collaboration, which "together signify collective action" (24). These dimensions include: governance, administration, autonomy, mutuality, and social capital dimensions.

The governance dimension of collaboration process emphasizes communication or shared decision-making because organizations in a collaboration share responsibility for common goals. Interorganizational communication is important because it facilitates the building of trust among organizations in collaboration, which further results in mutual commitment to the collaboration process (Ostrom, 1998; Ansell & Gash, 2007). Milward and Provan (2006) similarly suggest that public managers functioning as network leaders must engage in the design of the network or governance structure by determining the governance structure that best fits the network, implementing the structure, and identifying when it's necessary to make modifications to the network's governance design (19). By identifying a governance structure, parties to collaboration have a way by which to reach decisions and govern their behavior. Generally, written agreements such as memoranda of understanding allow organizations in collaboration to enhance accountability because the document clarifies performance and roles in collaboration (Bardach & Lesser, 1996).

The administration dimension is closely linked to the governance dimensions because it emphasizes the implementation or management of the network (Thomson & Perry 2006). Even when functioning beyond organizational boundaries and into networked governance, there is a still a need to identify a way by which to administer the functions of the collaboration. Without proper administration of the collaborative, organizations may lack clear direction as well as clear roles and responsibilities. The administration of a network involves management of accountability to ensure partner organizations are held accountable for outputs, management of conflict to ensure all parties are on the same page, and the management of commitment so that partners are consistently engaged and active in the collaborative process (Milward & Provan,

2006).  This is similar to what Ansell and Gash (2007) describe as "facilitative leadership," or collaborative leadership that stands ready to identify a network vision and maintain organizations engaged in collective action.

The autonomy dimension describes the process by which organizations reconcile individual self-interests and collective interests or the goals and objectives of the collaboration (Thomson & Perry, 2006).  Here, organizations weigh the transaction costs and the risks associated with becoming part of a collaborative partnership, or what some scholars refer to as the "dark side" of collaboration (Gazley & Brudney, 2007).  Jang and Feiock (2007), for example, find that the ability and inclinations of nonprofit organizations to collaborate with others is often dependent on their financial stakeholders.  In other words, nonprofit organizations that are dependent on private income sources are less likely to collaborate because of the autonomy that such funding sources afford when compared to government funding, which often carries strings attached such as stringent reporting requirements (Smith & Lipsky, 1993).

The mutuality dimension, on the other hand, refers to the process by which organizations form mutually beneficial collaborative arrangements or relationships (Thomson & Perry 2006).  Without organizations having a clear understanding of the benefits that they will derive from the collaboration process and their interdependence in being able to achieve a common vision, effective collaboration may not be possible because of the lack of commitment and motivation that may ensue (Ansell & Gash, 2007).  In order words, there must be a realization among organizations in collaboration that a common vision cannot be accomplished by any one organization alone.  Gazely and Brudney (2007), for instance, find that government and nonprofit organizations collaborate to obtain resources that they do not have for achieving shared goals.  Graddy and Chen (2009) similarly find that organizations sustain good relationships with other organizations in order to gain and exchange resources for common goals.

Lastly, the collaboration process involves building social capital norms such as reciprocity and trust (Thomson & Perry, 2006).  The presence of trust among organizations in collaboration matters because it helps reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, and has an influence on the prospects of future collaborations.  Ostrom (1998) and Gazely (2008) argue that a reputation for being trustworthy helps organizations to collaborate with other organizations within a community because organizations are willing to partner with those organizations that they perceive will follow through with collaborative arrangements and not take excessive advantage of partner organizations.  This is when face to face dialogue and a prehistory of cooperation has an impact on the collaboration decisions of organizations (Ostrom, 1998; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Sowa, 2009).

*Collaboration Benefits & Challenges*
A nonprofit organization's motivation to enter a collaborative arrangement of any kind is shaped by three main motivations (Guo & Acar, 2005).  First, nonprofit organizations are motivated to collaborate with other organizations because there may be an expectation or requirement that they comply with rules, regulations, and other governmental mandates (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Guo & Acar, 2005).  One major benefit of a nonprofit being in compliance with these institutional pressures includes the eligibility for government funding (Shaw, 2003).  Second, nonprofit organizations are also motivated to collaborate because of a need to access resources from their external environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Jang & Feiock, 2007; Gazley, 2010).  Increasing the pool of resources such as access to information and technical assistance benefits the nonprofit in several ways, including an increased capacity to deliver services and reduction in service costs (Gazley & Brudney, 2007).  Lastly, a nonprofit's motivation to collaborate can also be shaped by its embeddedness in social networks (Granovetter, 1985; Guo & Acar, 2005; Bunger, 2013).  That

is, an organization may collaborate because of the established experience and trust of working with other organizations. The benefit of partnering with organizations within the network is a reduction in the transaction costs when there is less of a need to gather information, monitor and/or enforce an arrangement (Bunger, 2013; MacIndoe, 2013). Thus, a nonprofit's motivation to collaborate can be due to institutional pressure, the need to access resources, and its embeddedness in social networks. These motivations are shaped by a series of benefits including an increased capacity to provide services, access to governmental support, and reduction in transaction costs—among other benefits.

Not all collaborative arrangements, however, are effective in producing the intended outputs and outcomes (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Gazley, 2010). This then results in a need to understand the challenges facing nonprofits in achieving effective collaboration (Provan & Milward, 2006; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Chen & Graddy, 2010). The literature on the dark side of collaboration, however, is still limited (Gazley and Brudney 2007). Milward and Provan (2006), for example, highlight the importance of managing the accountability and overall communication between collaborating organizations. For example, because of the multiple players involved in achieving a mutual goal and objective, it becomes challenging to determine who is responsible for what. Thus, it is important to identify the individual(s) responsible for agreed-upon outcomes (managing accountability); otherwise, it will be unclear who is to be held accountable when parties to the collaboration fail to achieve their mutual goals. Gray (1989) argues that in effective collaborations, organizations as collective take responsibility of the future of the collaboration. In their study of a nonprofit and its partner organizations, Babiak and Thibault (2009) found that a majority of interviewees were concerned with issues relating to the roles and responsibilities of partner organizations.

Another challenge cited by the literature facing nonprofit collaboration involves the ability of partners to engage in positive interaction and the ability to address differences in constructive ways (Gray 1989; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Open and constant communication was suggested as a key to prevent and address misunderstandings and potential conflicts. Failure to engage in meaningful dialogue can lead a collaboration to lose common goals and norms (Babiak & Thibault, 2009). Through effective communication, the organizations participating in a collaboration can jointly make decisions about how to manage the network, including areas such as the governance structure and build commitment (Milward & Provan, 2006). Ansell and Gash's (2007) model of the collaborative governance process specifically highlights the importance of face-to-face dialogue, which is "at the heart of a process of building trust, mutual respect, shared understanding, and commitment to the process" (558).

In sum, the literature provides a good understanding of the nonprofit collaboration process, the various motivations to collaborate, and the challenges facing nonprofits entering collaborative arrangements. What remains largely unexplored by the literature, however, is a deeper understanding on the diverse forms of nonprofit collaboration and the collaboration process, specifically challenges that nonprofits face in the process of working with other organizations to accomplish mutual goals and objectives. In the next section, we introduce our research case, which we use as the laboratory to explore nonprofit collaborations and the challenges that arise from multi-sector organizations working together to achieve mutual goals and objectives.

## Communities in Schools of North Texas

CISNT is a locally governed 501(C)(3) nonprofit organization that provides dropout prevention programs in public schools in Denton and Wise counties in the North Texas region. Students drop

out of school for many reasons. Asthe cause of a student dropping out of school is multidimensional in nature, this problem's complexity implies a "wicked problem (Weber and Khademian 2008)", which a single actor may be ill equipped to resolve alone. Thus, a wicked problem is best addressed through collaborative arrangements of many concerned actors (O'Toole, 1997; Kettl, 2006; Weber & Khademian, 2008).

At-risk students, for instance, miss valuable educational opportunities because of family problems, lack of permanent shelter, safety concerns, inadequate nutrition, lack of appropriate clothing or uniforms, and/or lack of transportation (CISNT, 2014). Thus, there is a need for diverse community organizations to collaborate to share resources and information in order to better serve disadvantaged youth. CISNT collaborates with hunger relief charities, community back-to-school programs, local governments, local businesses, community health clinics, and drug rehabilitation programs because CISNT lacks the capacity and resources to effectively address the diverse needs of at-risk youth. CISNT, in their 2014-2018 Strategic Plan, has identified as a primary goal the need of developing and expanding current partnerships (CISNT Strategic Goals and Strategies, 2014-2018, p. 2).

According to a CISNT estimate, in Denton and Wise County alone, over 20,000 public school students are at risk of dropping out of school (CISNT, 2015). Through school-based coordination, CISNT prevention programs focus on six different areas, including: supportive guidance and counseling, health and human services, parental and family involvement, career awareness and employment, enrichment activities, and educational enhancement. These programs are aimed at connecting students and their families to community resources tailored to their specific needs, and are performed in accordance with guidelines established by the Texas Education Agency.

In the 2014-15 academic year, CISNT served about 5,000 at-risk youth by operating three distinct programs: case management, dropout intervention programs, and after-school programs. With limited supports, CISNT actively pursues opportunities to collaborate with community organizations from the public, private and nonprofit sectors in order to better serve youth at risk of dropping out of school. Currently, for example, CISNT collaborates with a variety of organizations such as United Way of Denton (nonprofit), the City of Denton (local government), and the Village Church (faith-based).

**Data and Methodology**

The data used for this study were derived from a case study that involved two data collection methods; 1) review of 132 collaboration documentations and 2) semistructured interview with 10 CISNT collaborative partner organizations. Multiple sources of data are expected to create a full and deep understanding of case (Berg & Lune, 2012). The case study method is an appropriate research strategy when the purpose of a research is explanatory, controlling over behavioral events is not required, and the focus is on contemporary events (Luton, 2010; Yin, 2014). [1]

First, we conducted an analysis of all partnership documentation provided by CISNT to the researchers of this study in Spring 2014. Documents were carefully reviewed, and information were analyzed for several areas including: name of partner organization, contact person, whether collaboration agreement paperwork existed, date of the agreement, service provided by the partner organization to CISNT, and whether funding was provided to CISNT. Out of our review of the partnership documentation, a total of 132 partner organizations were identified.

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[1] University of North Texas IRB approved in April 8 2014 (application No. 14-136).

Second, we conducted open ended, semistructured interviews with 10 partner organizations of CISNT in the spring of 2014 to achieve adequate coverage for the purpose of the research and the best strategy when the research has specific areas to examine (Noor, 2008; Berg & Lune, 2012). Interview questions are designed to elicit information about collaboration related issues (see Appendix); however, the interviewers were allowed to digress to beyond scope of predetermined questions (Berg & Lune, 2012). In selecting partner agencies, a review of the current 132 partnership was undertaken to gain a picture of the different partnerships that existed. Researchers also consulted with CISNT to select the sample of organizations CISNT, and the sample was identified based on two objective criteria. First, partner organizations would be identified from a stratified pool from the public, private and nonprofit sectors. Second, the choice of sample represents the diverse services provided by partnerships. To contextualize our interviews, we reviewed each partner organization including their 990 form (if it is nonprofit) and other types of organizational reports. As reported in Table 2, the 10 organizations consist of 4 human service nonprofit organizations, a church, a government supported hybrid nonprofit organization, a city government, a nonprofit credit union, and two private organizations.

A questionnaire was created from the review of literature and comprised of questions relating to the nature of the relationship, formality of the partnership, interorganizational communication, governance, motivation for partnering with CISNT, and the perceived effectiveness of the partnership. This set of questions was used by the researchers to ask questions concerning the partner organization's views toward their relationship with CISNT. These questions were used as a guide for discussion to achieve the purpose of research. On occasion, however, the interviewer asked follow-up questions or a full question to probe for additional information. Interview notes were taken and used for analysis of the perceived relationships.

## Findings

Dins Forms of CISNT Collaborations: Review of 132 collaborations

<ins>Diverse Forms of CISNT Collaborations: Review of 132 collaborations</ins>
A common understanding of collaboration is hard to achieve owing to a number of terminologies and concepts used today in discussion of collaboration. Collaboration can vary in terms of formality, sector orientation, and resource sharing (Jang, Feiock, and Saitgalina; Milward & Provan, 2006; Linden, 2010; Forrer, Kee, & Boyer, 2014). Our focus in this analysis is to understand the diverse forms of collaborations in terms of formality, partner sectors and nature of resource shared by conducting a review of partnership documentation, which CISNT has managed (Grønbjerg, 1993).[2] Table 1 presents the results of document analysis of the 132 CISNT partner organizations.

*Formality*
Our review of CISNT collaborations suggest that only 20% of 132 partnerships have maintained signed contracts, which may be legally binding on both parties. In the case of 40% of CISNT collaborations, we find that organizations engage in partnering activities by signing Memorandum of Understanding. This engagement is not legally binding but still identifies the person in charge for those activities specified in a short document. For the remaining 40% of partnerships, we found them to be very informal in nature, without any specific documentation, or in the form of a one-time based arrangement.

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[2] To demonstrate consistency among observational ratings we assess inter-rater reliability by comparing evaluations of four independent coders (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000).

**Table 1: Document Analysis of CISNT 132 Partnerships**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **More formally designed** ⇕ **More informally emerged** | Contracts | 20% |
| | Formal collaborations: mutually agreed conditions specified | 40% |
| | Informal arrangements: no written document | 12% |
| | One time based arrangement- with potentials of extension | 28% |
| **Partnership with private** ⇕ **Partnership with public** | Partner with private organizations | 25% |
| | Partner with hybrid (private-nonprofit) organizations[3] | 3% |
| | Partner with other nonprofits | 38% |
| | Partner with hybrid (public-nonprofit) organizations[4] | 2% |
| | Partner with governments | 32% |
| **Funding based partnerships** ⇕ **Service partnerships** | Funding based partnerships | 32% |
| | Service giving (or exchange) partnerships with funding attached | 16% |
| | Service giving (or exchange) partnerships | 52% |

*Cross-Sector Partnerships*

Results also indicate that the largest proportion of partnerships (38%) was made with other nonprofit organizations, and one out of four partnerships was made with private organizations. CISNT partnerships with public organizations, including school districts and local governments, account for about 32% of all partnerships.  We categorize partnerships with corporate community responsibility programs under private and nonprofit hybrid organizations (for example, Wells Fargo Community Development), and we found 4 partnerships with private organizations operating nonprofit nature activities.  Public school social clubs are categorized as public-nonprofit hybrid category (such as a High School Spanish Club).

*Resource Sharing*
When considering the basis of the relationship (i.e., service vs. funding), more than half of the partnerships were classified as service exchange or support collaboration when compared to about 48% being funding based relationships.  Service based collaboration refers to instances where the partners provide one service or more to each other (i.e., referral of a client or provide counseling to a client).  Funding-based relationships are those where the exchange between both organizations is mainly monetary, without additional specification about service commitments in any of partnership documentation.

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[3] We categorize partnerships with corporate community reach out programs under private and nonprofit hybrid organizations. ex) Wells Fargo Community Development.
[4] Public school social clubs are categorized as public-nonprofit category. ex) Flower Mound High School Spanish Club.

*Challenges of Collaboration: Interview with 10 CISNT Partner Organizations*
For exploring challenges of collaboration, we conducted open ended, semistructured interviews with 10 partner organizations of CISNT, including 4 human service nonprofit organizations, a church, a government supported hybrid nonprofit organization, a city government, a nonprofit credit union, and two private organizations. Ten cases were cross-compared to refine inferences and identify emerging themes across organizations (Eisenhardt, 1989).[5] We found all of the partnerships selected for interviews have been maintained more than 5 years. As shown in table 2, the general nature of partnerships is resource sharing and supporting CISNT programs and the main goal of collaboration is helping CISNT achieve its mission in the community. From this interview and review of organizational reports and other relevant archival documents, we identified four main themes: nature of collaborations, resource sharing, need for improved communication, and issues regarding accountability.

*Partnership Documentation*

The predominant form of collaboration between CISNT and its partners is informal in nature. We found 8 of the 10 partnerships have maintained relationships on an informal basis without a legally binding contract with CISNT. Even though two of the partner organizations (Denton County Friends of Family and Retired Senior Volunteer Program) have maintained signed Memorandum of Understandings with CISNT, we found that the MOUs were quite general and vague, with only providing general FERPA and HIPPA legal stipulations. The collaborative relationship between CISNT and DATCU Credit Union, on the other hand, is more informal in that there is no contract or MOU in place to describe their relationships with CISNT. When asked about formality of partnership, the interviewee answered that "among the nonprofits, it is often an informal process when organizations contact one another to help solidify a project," and indicated that this lack of formality may prove to be problematic in the future if a change in contact person between the two organizations were to occur. Another interviewee who discussed the duration of partnership indicated that the expected duration of partnership is "Permanent, as long our organization keeps the Vision and Values we have, and CISNT holds up to their side of their job of doing the wonderful things, and then someone is with Wells Fargo to uphold the relationship."

We found that the City of Denton currently maintains a legally binding contract with CISNT. The federal funding the city granted to the CISNT carries a more formalized relationship due to strict oversight and reporting requirements from the funding agency. The City's Director of the Human Service Department described the relationship as more compliance-based rather than a collaborative one. From the City of Denton's perspective, the partner organization is in the best position to adequately determine what it can or cannot be done. As a result, the City provides CISNT with little direction on how to implement its programs. The United Way of Denton County also had a formal collaborative arrangement with CISNT, with a document signed by the CEOs of both organizations and specifying the roles for joint program operations.

*Resource Sharing*

Three of the partner organizations (i.e., City of Denton, Wells Fargo, and DATCU) have maintained funding based relationships with CISNT. These organizations support CISNT financially without a specific choice of supporting programs or functions they prefer. Especially we found a local bank branch of Wells Fargo collaborates with CISNT in more than just a donor -

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[5] The analysis of interviews was conducted by three researchers to ensure patterns and themes we identified were reliable.

## Table 2: Analysis of 10 Partnerships of CISNT

| Partner Organizations | Nature of partnership | Goals of collaboration | Formality | Length of partnership | Communication | Ways to improve |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **United Way of Denton County (Nonprofit)** | - Resource sharing (financial and programs)<br>- Running joint programs | Support families and students for building Community Capacity | Formal (Signed formal documents to specify expectations of UNDW and CISNT) | 5 years | Formal meetings | - Identify more potential resource to be shared |
| **Denton County Friends of the Family (Nonprofit)** | - Resource sharing (Programs) | Help needy families | Informal (Signed MOU but very general in nature) | About 7 years | Informal (occasional email exchange) | - Redefine MOU<br>- Define regular communication channel |
| **Robson Ranch Senior Living (Private/Nonprofit Hybrid)** | - Resource sharing (volunteers)<br>- Support of volunteer mentors | building Community Capacity by getting seniors involved | Informal (No MOU) | More than 5 years | Informal (no specific communication channel established) | - Redefine MOU<br>- Define regular communication channel |
| **Retired Senior Volunteer Program (Nonprofit)** | - Resource sharing (volunteers and programs) | Help needy children' s educational capacity | Informal (Signed MOU but very general in nature) | 13 years | Informal (occasional email exchange and phone call conversation) | - Define regular or formal communication channel |
| **Interfaith Ministry (Nonprofit)** | - Resource sharing (In-kind donations)<br>- Running joint programs | Support vulnerable families and students | Informal (No signed formal document) | More than 7 years | Informal (occasional email exchange and phone call conversation) | - Ensure communication channel<br>- Involve decision making process |
| **Keep Denton Beautiful (Hybrid: Public/Nonprofit)** | - Running joint programs (Community Beautification Projects) | Educate students and families to engage in community | Informal (No signed formal document) | 8 years | Informal (occasional email exchange and phone call conversation) | - MOU needed<br>- Develop performance management system<br>- Ensure communication channel |

**Table 2: Analysis of 10 Partnerships of CISNT (continued)**

| Partner Organizations | Nature of partnership | Goals of collaboration | Formality | Length of partnership | Communication | Ways to improve |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Village Church of Flower Mound (Congregation)** | - Resource sharing<br>- Support of volunteer mentors | Serving community by mobilizing volunteers | Informal (No signed formal document) | 5 years | Informal (email & phone) and ad-hoc meeting | - Develop performance management system |
| **DATCU (Nonprofit Credit Union)** | - Financial support<br>- Support of volunteer mentors | Involvement in community | Informal (No signed formal document) | More than 9 years | Informal (email & phone) and ad-hoc meeting | - Define MOU |
| **Wells Fargo (Private)** | - Financial support<br>- Resource sharing | Help to stay in school by educating finance | Informal (No signed formal document) | About 5 years | Informal (email & phone) and ad-hoc meeting | - Develop performance management system |
| **City of Denton (Government)** | - Financial support<br>- Build community capacity | Broad community development | Formal contract for funding allocation | More than 5 years | Formal and regular meeting | - Regular communication<br>- Develop performance management system |

recipient relationship, since Wells Fargo regularly offer money management workshops for CISNT clients. The interviewee described its mutual resource sharing nature, "CISNT is a resource to us which helps us do what we want to do for the community and we are very happy to participate in on-going partnership to achieve social missions together." In addition, DATCU and Wells Fargo operate volunteer programs that afford their employees volunteer opportunities at CISNT services and activities.

Interfaith Ministry, a local human service nonprofit organization to support children in CISNT programs, has provided in-kind donations for many years. For example, Interfaith has supported CISNT by distributing back-to-school supplies for CISNT client families. The partnership between Interfaith and CISNT has evolved voluntarily over time, and their relationship is often need based rather than contract based. The interviewee describes their partnership is service exchange nature: "We have built a referral partnership which allows us to know what kind of services are available from each other. One of benefit from this collaboration is being able to get the word out to right population we try to serve. It is more of way to advertise our resources to people who most need them, and to make sure that we have verification of the eligible service clients. CISNT provides us with statistics and we can grant right to get the services, vice versa."

Denton County Friends of the Family (DCFOF) serves as a program resource to the CISNT's mission because some of the issues that CISNT students face often involve situations of sexual abuse and domestic violence, which are the main service areas of DCFOF. DCFOF partners with CISNT to provide anti-violence presentations to CISNT campus programs and provides services to clients who have been affected by domestic violence and sexual assault. Keep Denton Beautiful, a government supported nonprofit organization, and CISNT have an eight years of partnership where both entities benefit by working together by offering programs for CISNT students to take responsibility in the beautification of their city. CISNT recruits volunteers for cleanup events from each of the schools they serve and coordinates the on-site cleanups for each school. CISNT is a partner agency of United Way of Denton County, with United Way providing funding assistance to realize the education mission of CISNT. United Way also runs a joint program of free tax return consultation for disadvantaged families, which CISNT is able to refer to assistance. Four of the interviewed organizations provide direct-services to clients of CISNT by volunteering to mentor students in afterschool programs that CISNT runs.

*Communication*
While examining partnership communication between CISNT and partnering organizations, results appear to be mixed. An example of regular and well maintained communication was be found in the relationship between CISNT and DATCU. During the interview, the DATCU representative acknowledged that they receive weekly emails from CISNT and the regular communication build the partnership solid. Yet, this interviewee also serves on the board for CISNT and his/her role at the CISNT may allow him or her to maintain communication when compared to other partner organizations that do not have organizational representatives also serving on the board of CISNT. Open communication channels were found to be lacking for some of the partnerships with CISNT. Some partner organizations such as Robson Ranch and Retired Senior Volunteers indicated that they engage in communication based on emergent needs, with occasional emails and infrequent phone conversations. The City's head of Human Services mentioned that "communication tends to be limited to e-mail and telephone conversations, predominantly focused on reporting requirements of funding granted to the CISNT." In two cases, interviewees indicated they only learn about CISNT events or program changes by visiting websites and expressed lack of structured communication channel.

*Accountability*

A last key theme identified from our analysis of the 10 semistructured interviews was the accountability between CISNT and partnering organizations. For example, Robson Ranch, a local retirement community, has provided volunteer mentors to one elementary school but those volunteers are not aware that they are participating in CISNT programs. The point of contact at Robson Ranch does not have any information on whom to contact at CISNT.  On the other hand, an interviewee of a community church expresses a different experience. In response to an open-ended question on partnership experience on CINST, the representative of Village Church said: "The collaboration effort has always been clear in my opinion. CISNT provides opportunities for our church body to engage, support and empower the children in our local community.... Although in almost all cases we cannot speak about the Gospel of Christ, we can show the children and CISNT the love of Christ through our actions in serving our brothers and sisters in the community."

In addition, several organizations indicated that they expect CISNT to implement a performance management system that would help partner agencies evaluate performance of their services and activities as well as monitor progress on mutually established goals and objectives.  The City of Denton was the only organization appears to invest in accountability measures when working with CISNT. Because the City of Denton disperses federal grant monies to CISNT, a strict set of guidelines must be adhered to. The city representative noted that formal documentation between the City of Denton and CISNT was on file (in this case, a Memorandum of Understanding) because the City is responsible for keeping CISNT accountable to the federal guidelines associated with the awarded grant. Thus, formal accountability measures are used in the relationship between the City of Denton and CISNT because the City serves as an intermediary between federal rules and regulations and the local agencies that receive grant allocations.

## Conclusion

This study has aimed to better understand nonprofit collaboration by conducting a case study of a community nonprofit organization's collaborations.  Specifically, we seek to gain a greater understanding of the diverse forms of nonprofit collaborations and the challenges that organizations face in the collaborative processes.  Although a small sample case study does not support a firm causal relationship, the results from the two levels of analyses  open doors for further discoveries and serve ground work for insights for scholarly inquiries and provide lessons for collaborative managers (Berg & Lune, 2012; Eisenhardt, 1989).

With regards to the forms of nonprofit collaborations, our findings from the first analysis of the 132 partnership document indicates that there is diversity in organizations from the private (28%), public (32%), and nonprofit (40%) sectors that collaborate with CISNT.  We find, for example, that some organizations collaborate for pure resource exchange, while others for the funding support for CISNT services.  While a majority of collaborative arrangements were formalized, results indicate that about 40% of CISNT's partnerships are informal in nature.  This is consistent with the literature, which finds that not all collaboration takes the form of a contract or formal arrangement (Gazley 2008). Collaborations tend to emerge among nonprofit organizations from their need to overcome lack of resources and desire to build reputation (Thomson & Perry, 2006; Gazley, 2008; Sowa, 2009; Jang, Feiock, & Saitgalina 2014).

With regards to the challenges of collaboration, the 10 interviews revealed some interesting findings.  First, we found a challenge in maintaining expectations of partner agencies due to the lack of formal or written documents that delineate responsibilities of parties in collaboration.

Studies note that there can be conflicts and misunderstanding regarding division of responsibilities between collaborators, and that ambiguity is the most important to resolve by identifying mutually agreed conditions of collaboration (Milward & Provan, 2006; Linden, 2010; Mankin & Cohen, 2004; Forrer, Kee, & Boyer, 2014). The partnership agreed upon in writing, which sets out the common purposes and potential outputs and outcomes of partnership, will lead effective contributions of all members of partnership. Formal agreements often include congruent and time sensitive goals to be achieved by the partnership, which helps the partner organizations understand their respective role in the collaborative process (Graddy & Chen, 2009). Organizations should be clear about their individual roles and responsibilities within the partnership, and avoid potential disagreements or conflicts between the organizations. According to Milward and Provan (2006), accountability has to be managed by institutionalizing roles and expectation of parties so that participants are well informed about other parties' activities and build commitment culture within collaboration. They also note that one of the most important management tasks is to set up mechanism to resolve potential conflict.

Second, our findings revealed a challenge of interorganizational communication when partner organizations exchange e-mails or phone calls in an ad-hoc manner. Regular communication between partner organizations can be a way to enhance partnerships because interorganizational communication helps partner organizations to clarify mutual goals, to reduce ambiguity, and to understand norms, rules, and even culture (Shaw, 2003). Frequent communication with partner agencies also helps with the management of accountability by monitoring and ensuring that dedicated resources are actually used for collaboration activities (Milward & Provan, 2006). In addition, effective collaboration requires that there be positive interaction and that partner organizations be able to engage in constructive dialogue (Gray, 1989). If there is a lack of proper communication, other aspects of effective collaboration are also compromised such as the ability to engage in mutual decision-making. Our interviews indicated that even if CISNT maintains the same purpose and members for many years of partnership, it is still necessary to develop regular communication with partner agencies to update values and norms of collaborations and conditions and expectations of activities.

This study makes several contributions to theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the results of this research confirm theoretical arguments about the importance of interorganizational communication and holding parties accountable. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that nonprofit organizations should make a more conscious effort to invest resources in managing their partnerships in order to achieve positive outcomes. Organizations, however, may be limited in investing such resources because of capacity limitations. Another practical implication from our findings is that regular communication channels may enhance collaboration effectiveness by ensuring shared-vision and by sharing resources and support for emerging needs through periodical communication. The last implication to practice by this research is that formal accountability mechanisms, such as performance management or deliberation processes for sharing goals and identifying resources, contributes to strengthening nonprofit collaboration by clarifying common missions to be achieved and reducing ambiguity. This then results in the need to recruit or train nonprofit managers with collaborative management skills.

Despite the meaningful contributions of this research, the study is not without its limitations. A case study approach limits the generalizability of the results to other contexts. Future research, therefore, should consider a larger sample of organizations and its partners. In addition, future research conduct hypothesis testing to investigate the causes of collaboration challenges such as a lack of accountability or appropriate communication channels. Because this research considers

the context of organizations working in the area of dropout prevention, future research should explore collaboration processes and challenges in other contexts for comparative analysis.

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## Appendix: Semistructured interview questions

Collaboration goal (or mission to pursue from this partnership)

Are you clear about goals of partnership? And what do you want to achieve from this partnership?

Do you have any specific goal documented to achieve from this partnership?

Nature of the relationships

- How long it has been? (age of relationship): short term or long term (semi-permanent?)
- Is this relationship more like "encouraged (prescribed) by law" or "voluntary."
- Resource sharing? What kind? Financial (Donative/ Service grant?) exchange?
- Degree of competition: Do you perceive CISNT as your competitor?

Formality of partnership

- What is the nature of partnership in terms of formality?
- Do you have any paperwork drafted to define relationship with CISNT?: Written documentation? MOU in writing?

Board involvement in partnership building

- How did you make decision to partner with CISNT? – Who were involved in initial decision to partner with CISNT?
- Do you have a person in charge of collaboration? If yes, who is taking the role of in person in charge?
- Leadership: Do you identify any catalytic actor in partnership?
- Any other actors have role in building partnership?
- Number of actors involved in initial decision to partner with CISNT

Communication practice

- What is the method of communication?
- Contact frequency (How often do you contact CISNT?)

Governance of your organization (or part of social responsibility of private corporate)

- Self governing
- Led by center organization- funding organization (more hierarchical)
- Led by facilitating organization- identifiable leader

Why do collaborate (or partner) with CISNT? : Motivation and purpose

Do you experience any challenge from partnering with CISNT? : Please identify obstacles (in collaboration) that to be overcome to make partnership more successful

Network structure  Who do you partner with other than CISNT? Please identify organizations and their nature of partnerships

- Informal

- Financial donation:
- Sharing resource:
- Participation in on-going discussion to achieve social missions:

## Accountability of partnership

Do you feel the collaboration is sufficiently held accountable?  Whom do you feel accountable of? And potential responses are:

- To the collaboration manager,
- To your staff and CISNT staff,
- To consumers,
- To legal requirements,
- Or other

## Measures of Collaboration Effectiveness

- Do you think partnership with CISNT is effective to realize goals of partnership?
- Please advise how to improve management of collaboration