

*ENGAGE*MS*

Collaboration as a Roadmap to a Better Mississippi

If we elect to view challenges as opportunities, the austerity caused by the current economic recession has provided us a plethora of possibilities. In Mississippi, we need to formalize a mechanism of collaboration between stakeholders and service providers, focusing on the critical issues detailed below. We have numerous demonstrated needs and compassionate people who are willing to do whatever it takes to address these problems. The next step is to provide an organizational foundation to support organizations and communities in addressing our systemic issues. This report describes a model for accomplishing this goal that will lead to a new strategy for long-term solutions to critical issues.

Funding from the federal government cannot solve every problem. Likewise, our state government cannot do this on its own. Local communities understand the needs and problems within their boundaries, but often lack the resources needed to affect permanent solutions. The nonprofit sector in Mississippi has great intentions, but a recent national study by the National Conference on Citizenship indicates that the nonprofit sector within our state is not as viable as it could be¹. The business sector in our state wants to provide both economic and manpower support to solve existing critical issues in the communities, but there is currently no conduit for channeling this support. Our higher education system and campuses (including public, private, and community colleges) initiate campaigns of “community service” in their respective areas of our state. Volunteers from all of these entities, including the faith-based sector, work with compassion and professionalism in efforts that can be valued in the many millions of dollars each year. However, the net outcome is that our state is not “moving the needle” on our serious problems.

Despite current efforts when national studies emerge showing the states that are the poorest performing on substantial issues, Mississippi almost always receives unfavorable recognition. At some point, we must embrace the old adage, “If you do what you’ve always done, don’t be surprised if you get what you’ve always gotten.”

Often in these United States individuals and organizations with limited resources attempt to address challenges without involving other related organizations. They put a lot of time, effort, and energy into their work. This method of operation is repeated in nearby communities as other, analogous entities are doing something similar with comparable, limited results. Multiply this one thousand-fold and you get the picture of an “isolated impact²” model that is not exclusive to Mississippi, but exists world-wide: too many entities with too many solutions spreading precious few dollars much too thinly to actually channel effective change.

Here in Mississippi we do not use the “isolation” model after a disaster. Diverse entities pull together with a common goal and (for the most part) make best use of resources to help a community to recover. With this understanding, and considering the number of critical issues facing our state, Mississippi can and must develop a functional solution of collaboration to address these issues – and be a litmus test for the nation.

Let us revisit another old adage: “It is amazing what we can accomplish together when no one cares who gets the credit.” This speaks to an altruism that Mississippi can embrace. There is a growing body of research that proves that “collective impact²” can effectively solve critical problems. We must create an environment—a foundation of full collaboration—that supports resolutions in a manner that ensures that we utilize a business model for producing solutions. By moving away from a landscape of “individual impact” and collectively aligning resources toward common goals, collaboration can create a foundation for solving community problems by leveraging a high-yield Return-On-Investment model. We must develop a strategy for effectively “channeling change.”³

[Please note that this model must also be designed to encourage individualized innovation that can later be supported through collaboration.]

The Mississippi Economic Council, in its Blueprint Mississippi 2011 report, listed as a major goal, “Improve Communication and **Coordination** [emphasis included in report] Among Public, Private and Nonprofit Leaders.”⁴ The brightest minds and most innovative leaders in Mississippi recognized this need well before our friends at Harvard and Stanford began publishing works around “collective impact!” This provides a critical component for leadership toward a model for Mississippi.

Our colleges and universities have long endeavored to leverage their intellectual and manpower resources to solve community problems. Many of our Mississippi institutions are nationally recognized for their work in this area⁵. Around the nation, this trend is garnering attention. It is such a growing part of the institutions of higher learning mission that many universities and colleges (including those in Mississippi) have elevated the concept formally by adding it to their mission, having President’s include it as an essential element of their personal platform, and by designing relevant outcome measurements for this work. These efforts have grown to the point where it is nationally being recognized⁶ as an important factor in the economy of a community, region, state, and in the U.S.

Another national trend that creates huge potential for Mississippi involves looking at “community engagement” as a critical part of the economic health in communities and in our state. The term “community engagement” need not be vague. As we are discussing collaboration in this report, the term effectively summarizes the “Communication and Coordination” need described by the Mississippi Economic Council. It expands on the notion to be inclusive of any and all individuals and organizations that wish to participate (either through funding or manpower resources) to leverage work that develops to solve community needs. [For the purposes of this discussion we will call this the “Charitable Economy.” This “sector” is not mutually exclusive of the public sector, business sector, nonprofit sector, or faith-based sector, but is, rather, a collective group of representatives from all the above that seek to solve community problems collectively. Information from the Mississippi Secretary of State indicates that this sector represents \$9 Billion a year for Mississippi.] A recent report published by the National Conference on Citizenship (supported by a bipartisan charter from Congress), identified key factors within community engagement that directly correlate to “civic health” and the economy¹. These findings proffer both very good news and a significant challenge for Mississippi. Our State ranked number four in the nation on indicators related to elements such as volunteerism. Unfortunately, we ranked in the bottom ten for measures related to the strength of our nonprofit sector. Fortunately for Mississippi, these elements are related, and the report provides additional insight to map a strategic path forward in alignment with Blueprint Mississippi.

Based on guidance provided in Blueprint Mississippi, along with the information referenced in this report, leaders in the state of Mississippi have already begun to craft a model that will create a strong foundation to support further collaboration and collective impact. As an example, for the past two years the Mississippi Center for Nonprofits, Mississippi Economic Council, Mississippi Association of Grantmakers, the Mississippi Association of Community Action Agencies, and Volunteer Mississippi and the United Way have combined their individual conferences into one coordinated a state-wide collaboration conference⁷. (Some of the authors of the studies referenced in this report have attended the conference.)

This past year new partners were added, including academic institutions and United Ways of Mississippi. The conference will continue to grow. Among those groups identified as critical partners in the ongoing collaboration are municipalities, community foundations, and faith-based groups. Media inclusion will be a critical piece, and strategic outreach to youth and the K-12 field can also augment this developing alliance. Retirees and veterans are also groups that have enormous potential to create positive impact.

There will always exist in our society issues that divide us. It is part of our American heritage (and freedom) to pursue these in ways that align with our beliefs. The time has come when we must separate these issues from the problems on which we can largely agree. If we can do this in response to a hurricane, tornado, or flood, we can align our efforts to address issues related to education, unemployment, and poverty.

In addition, a new report just released found that volunteering is associated with a 27% increase in securing employment⁸. Particularly noteworthy for Mississippi, volunteers without a high school degree and volunteers in rural areas have an even higher increase – 51% and 55%, respectively. This relationship between volunteering and employment is relatively stable across gender, age, ethnicity, geographical area, and job market conditions.

We can continue to do what we've always done, knowing that we will not create lasting solutions, or we can expand our fledgling start at joining forces for the greater good and build a better, stronger Mississippi and create a Roadmap for other states to follow.

Leading the efforts for *ENGAGE*MS* will be four organizations that have already created the foundation for full development of this model: Mississippi Center for Nonprofits, Mississippi Economic Council, Mississippi Association of Grantmakers, and Volunteer Mississippi. A description of each is attached.

References:

1. "Civic health and Unemployment II: The Case Builds." (September 2012). *National Conference on Citizenship*. Washington, D.C. (<http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?download=114kcf11427>)
2. Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (Winter 2011). "Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. (http://www.ssireview.org/images/articles/2011_WI_Feature_Kania.pdf)
3. Hanleybrown, F., Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (January 2012). "Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. (http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/channeling_change_making_collective_impact_work#)
4. "Blueprint Mississippi, 2011." (January 2012). *Mississippi Economic Council*. <http://www.mec.ms/blueprint/BPMS.FINALFORPRINTINGPIP.1.18.12.pdf>
5. "President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll." (March 2013) *Corporation for National and Community Service*. <http://www.nationalservice.gov/special-initiatives/honor-roll>
6. Wittman, A. and Crews, T. (2012) "Engaged Learning Economies: Aligning Civic Engagement and Economic Development in Community-Campus Partnerships." *Campus Compact*. <http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Engaged-Learning-Economies-White-Paper-2012.pdf>
7. *Positioned for Progress*; MS's Annual Mission-based Statewide Collaboration Conference <http://www.positionedforprogress.com/>
8. Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., & DiTommaso, A. (2013). "Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment: Does Volunteering Increase Odds of Finding a Job for the Out of Work?". *Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation*. Washington, DC, 2013. (http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf)