GrantSpace - Collaboration Hub

Alliance to Enhance Innovation in Local Government

Participating Organizations

● International City County Management Association, Washington, DC
● Arizona State University, School of Public Affairs, Phoenix, AZ

Please note that all data below was derived from the collaboration's nomination for the Collaboration Prize. None of the submitted data were independently verified for accuracy.

Formation

Type of Collaboration:

● Joint Programming to launch and manage one or more programs
● Administrative Consolidation to share, exchange, or provide back office services such as accounting, IT, human resources
● An alliance or similar collaborative structure through which members retain structural autonomy and have defined roles and responsibilities to achieve specific social goals or purposes

Geographic Scope: National
Collaboration Focus Area: Public Affairs
Population Served: Other
Year Collaboration was Established: 2005
Goals Sought Through Collaboration:

● Expand reach and/or range of services / programs
● Achieve administrative efficiencies
● Leverage complementary strengths and/or assets

Reasons Prompting Collaboration:

● (Potential) departure of one or more Executive Directors / CEOs
● Advancement of a shared goal
● Response to a community need

Who Initiated Collaboration:

● Board member(s)
● Executive Director(s) / CEO(s) / President(s)

Number of Participating Organizations: 3-4
Were Partners Added or Dropped?: Yes
Consultant Role: To facilitate negotiations or discussions that led to the formation of the collaboration
The Innovation Groups (IG) was established in 1979, to provide a platform for communication and education among local governments. The organization promoted innovation through the sharing of ideas and networking, but in late 2002, IG faced an uncertain future with its long-time president retiring and a weak economy threatening its financial sustainability. IG reached out to longtime competitor, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) in hopes of forming a mutually beneficial collaboration. Despite initial skepticism between the two organizations, they put their prior relationship aside and after a year-long dialogue determined that IG and ICMA would better serve their customers if a partnership was formed.

The collaboration originally focused on joint training efforts, conferences and marketing opportunities. A letter of agreement was signed in 2005 committing to finding a third partner within the higher education system. The board re-branded IG as the “Alliance for Innovation” representing the triad of ICMA, IG and a yet to be selected educational institution. Request for Proposals were sent to 50 universities and in June of 2006 Arizona State University was selected based on its reputation, research capacity and faculty expertise.

Management

Management Structure: Jointly managed by the Executive Directors of the partner organizations

A key component to the collaboration was developing a management structure that recognized and respected the diverse cultures of each organization. By October 2005, the IG Board adopted new by-laws reducing its appointments from 18 to 9 and providing 3 board appointments to ICMA and the university partner. The transitioned IG staff became Alliance for Innovation staff reporting to a new president. Corporate office space was donated at ASU’s School of Public Affairs in downtown Phoenix. IG’s former corporate headquarters in Tampa converted into virtual offices with Florida staff working from home. The Alliance Board of Directors retained a president for the organization to oversee staff members and act as the key contact with the board, ICMA and ASU. Both ASU and ICMA identified designated contacts within their organizations to undertake collaboration planning.

The management structure provides maximum opportunity for collaboration, yet maintains independence for each organization to fulfill its primary mission.

Challenges

Challenges to Making the Collaboration Work:

- Achieving shared vision
- Coordinating / merging / integrating operations
- Leading and / or managing the collaboration

Change brings anxiety and collaboration with a one-time competitor requires staff members to re-examine their roles in the spirit of partnership. Combining staff and integrating electronic and financial systems are daunting tasks, which can result in an overestimation of what is being given up and underestimation of what is being gained.

Organizational responsibilities were outlined in an operational agreement and reinforced through web meetings, e-mail and virtual conferences. Early on there was significant mistrust between IG and ICMA staff, but frequent candid communication has been the key in integrating organizational cultures. Alliance leaders constantly communicated the benefits and positive outcomes of the partnership with their respective institutions. Although each organization has made compromises, each has also benefited. Combining the perspectives of scholars, public management practitioners and local government innovators has created a more relevant resource for the public overall.

Impact
Internal Efficiencies and Effectiveness:

- Financial savings - Consolidation of management / administration
- Financial savings - Coordination / consolidation of programming
- Human resources - Stronger / more effective board of directors
- Greater ability to allocate resources to areas of need - Greater ability for each partner to focus on core competency

Community Impact:

- Improved quality of programs / services
- Greater coordination of services (less overlap, duplication, fragmentation)

New Research: In 2007, a joint white paper on the financial crisis demonstrated how blending research with current conditions can provide a reliable road map in a weak economy. Since 2008, more than 5,000 local government officials have accessed the document and hundreds of presentations have been made to advise officials on how to navigate through the economic crisis.

Development of the Knowledge Network: A web 2.0 platform now incorporates ICMA, Alliance members and the public in a robust social networking system. ASU and ICMA interns research state of the art solutions to member questions. Within the first two months, more than 3,000 local government officials logged on with approximately 60 new professionals joining the network every day.

Marvin Andrews Scholars: ASU’s Marvin Andrews program has grown and has been able to add a year of employment for students with the Alliance. Students get real-life experience within local government, which makes them more marketable in the job arena. To date, every Marvin Andrews fellow has been successfully employed in the government or non-profit sector.

Cost savings: The collaboration has allowed the Alliance to close its Florida office and transition financial and membership records to the ICMA. Together these changes resulted in an annual cost reduction of around $100,000. Collaboration spawned new ideas such as converting the Alliance’s monthly newsletter to an electronic format, saving $125,000 annually. The Alliance also transformed its former quarterly webcasts to a monthly webinar series, resulting in a quadrupling of participants and a tripling of net revenue. ASU contributes approximately $50,000 a year toward the Alliance intern salaries.

Content Development and Sharing: The Alliance and ASU staffs contribute to ICMA publications and ICMA staff author articles for Alliance publications. While Alliance content focuses on emerging issues facing local governments, ICMA focuses more on leadership and ethics.

Conference Sharing - Both ICMA and the Alliance reserve sessions in their annual conference for the other to present. ASU includes Alliance and ICMA representation on their discussion panels. All three worked to develop a new event titled BIG IDEAS, which identifies trends and explores the future of local government through the diversity of its participants. Instead of each partner conducting separate conferences, the collaboration increases the pool of information and eases the financial burden on each organization.

Better Service: By providing officials access to the information generated by scholars, practitioners and innovators each entity increased its access to knowledge and dramatically reduced the time to disseminate it. The goal of accelerating access to best practices, increasing networking capacity and supporting a broad community of practice has been significantly enhanced.

Model

We have learned that competitors such as IG and ICMA can become collaborators. The common goal of improving local government is the driving force behind this successful partnership. For ASU, being a partner in the Alliance has allowed it to be recognized for its direct connection to government practitioners. Other entities can benefit from this model by finding common missions and stakeholders within other organizations.

A lesson from our experience is that leadership from collaborators must be resolute in making the partnership work. Celebrate success and be honest about conflict and adversity. No matter the setback or challenge, the Alliance Board of Directors has not wavered in pursuing a collaboration that makes the organization efficient, effective and resilient.

Efficiencies Achieved
The cooperative design of the Alliance as a partnership of three different kinds of organizations augments the capacities of each without direct financial costs. The staff of the Alliance brings practitioner knowledge and experience to the design of ASU research projects and the supervision of management interns. The School of Public Affairs brings a scholarly perspective to work planning in the Alliance and generates scholarly research that is disseminated to Alliance members. ASU and the Alliance add research and idea generation to ICMA, and ICMA provides access to local government administrators, survey research capacity, and a sophisticated website.

Cost Reduction
- Convert physical FL office to virtual offices: $60,000
- Staff Sharing: $30,000
- Staff reduction: $35,000
- ENewsletter: $125,000
- Collaborate on conferences: $7,200
- Total cost reduction: $257,200

Added Value
- Association Software: $25,000
- Knowledge Network: $400,000
- Shift to Webinars: $50,000
- ASU Space: $45,000
- ASU Interns: $50,000
- Total Added Value: $570,000

The Results of efficiencies and resource leveraging:
1. More resources focused on programs for members (trainings have increased almost fourfold, while attendees have increased more than fivefold)
2. A “greener” approach to providing services with less paper, transport and travel required
3. An improved web presence and increased collaboration among our respective members and staff
4. Shared use of association management software gives the Alliance a more efficient membership renewal/past due invoicing process
5. Significantly more resources dedicated to research through the interns and stronger reach into member organizations where they are subsequently employed, and interaction with faculty members at ASU and in the Academic Network, resulting in 24 publications and reports and 49 presentations at academic and professional meetings.

Evolution
The Alliance for Innovation actively works to bridge the academic world with the practitioners and help apply the research in the field. The Alliance, with our partners, is responsible for the development of an annual White Paper on critical topics of interest to local practitioners. The first, Navigating the Fiscal Crisis, was published in 2009, funded by ICMA and authored by two ASU professors with contributions from 14 national scholars who participate in the Academic Network. The second, Connected Communities: The Role of Local Government in Citizen Engagement, was funded by ASU and also authored by ASU professors and 15 members of the Academic Network and was published last month. It is available to the public on the internet and to local governments across the world through the ICMA /Alliance Knowledge Network. Resilient Responses to the Fiscal Crisis is an online wiki that compiles 32 case studies on how local governments have made the crisis healthier than before. While we most certainly have our work cut out for us, your work to accelerate the development of innovation helped us connect with our community leaders and residents.” Heather Harper, Assistant Town Manager, Falmouth, MA

The Alliance also makes a direct contribution to the academic programs at ASU, specifically the Marvin Andrews Fellowship Program which seeks to prepare future city and county managers. Starting in 2008, the management interns who have been selected as Marvin Andrews fellows are enrolled in the Master of Public Administration degree program in the School of Public Affairs. Their academic study is integrated with their work in the Alliance. In the first year of employment, the management interns monitor and report on innovative practices in local governments across the country and contribute to the research activities of the Alliance for Innovation. In the second year, they are assigned to local governments in the region to conduct projects that improve policy and management in their host government. Upon completion of two years of employment and the MPA degree, the Marvin Andrews Fellows seek positions in local government. They are highly prepared with strong education, extensive knowledge of local government innovation, and experience in converting research into action. The Marvin Andrews fellows will contribute critically needed talent at a time of widespread generational turnover in local government leadership. They are ambassadors of the university and will continue to advance the goals of the Alliance in their careers as local government managers committed to research and innovation.

"The first year Marvin Andrews' students get their initial exposure to local government through the Alliance. They witness firsthand the innovative programs which are being implemented by outstanding municipal and county employees. I have seen how this experience introduces the students to best practices and cements their commitment to careers in local government." Lloyd Harrell, ICMA Range Rider

Two specific undertakings were envisioned when the Alliance was formed in 2005. The first was a comprehensive...
collaborative project undertaken by the Alliance and its partners to develop the Knowledge Network. A state of the art content management system/social media site, it replaced the outdated technology of ICMA’s knowledge forums and the Innovation Groups Knowledge Center to bring combined content to both groups’ members, the Academic Network members and to a lesser extent the public at large. While it was no easy task to address the differing interests of an organization that focuses on individuals (ICMA), academics and students (ASU) and local government organizations (Alliance for Innovation), the Knowledge Network has in four short months built a following of nearly 6,000 local government professionals who can query one another about solutions to community problems and collaborate through groups, blogs, wikis and other social media tools.

"The Alliance provides a virtual forum for shared learning and the propagation of best practices. It's the first place we turn when looking for innovative practices and entrepreneurial practitioners. It serves as a highly cost effective one-stop marketplace of bright ideas and invigoration." David Boesch, County Manager, County of San Mateo, CA

A second original goal was to organize an annual “big ideas” meeting where leading thinkers and practitioners could assemble to examine major issues impacting local governments and explore possible future solutions. The notion was to have a limited number of invited participants, all of whom could take part in conversations provoked and inspired by visiting speakers. The first of these meetings was successfully held in Decatur, GA in the fall of 2009. In turn, it inspired the Community Connections white paper, which was the theme of the second meeting held in Ann Arbor, MI in 2010. Both events served to bring academics, local government professionals, foundation representatives and think tank leaders together to reflect on key themes and drivers in communities across the country.

The collaboration of the Innovation Groups, ICMA and ASU through the Alliance for Innovation is uniquely suited to identify innovations that further good governance, good stewardship of public resources and the development of effective and efficient public services. We connect with the academic communities that study local government practices, the city managers that lead local governments across the world and city and county staff at all levels that seek progressive methods of improving their local community.

"Bottom line, in my mind, active involvement in the Alliance strengthens an organization’s commitment to innovation, can help motivate and encourage employees throughout the organization, and involves you in a community of other organizations with similar objectives. We’ve seen a lot of positive results here in Downers Grove." Michael Baker, Assistant Village Manager, Downers Grove, IL

But collaboration isn’t easy. The Alliance’s strategic partnerships with ICMA and ASU requires candid and deliberate conversation, problem solving when our institutional cultures differ and adoption of a mentality of “we” rather than “I.” Nevertheless, we work together and solve issues as they arise, because we are joined in a commitment to help local government professionals and their organizations evolve to be the most effective they can be in serving their communities. We share a common goal of enabling local government staff to be prepared to take on challenges the future will bring. This collaboration allows each organization to bring its unique assets and combine them to make the sum of the parts greater than the individual contributions. And through the journey of creating and operating the Alliance for Innovation, we have learned new lessons about collaboration that we share with those who are undertaking new partnerships and complex relationships.

Was undertaking a risky partnership with a one-time competitor and simultaneously attempting to meld practitioner and scholarly cultures a wise decision? Our answer is a resounding yes and the collaborative actions that followed prove the point. Having the partnership in place greatly improved our capacity to help local governments deal with the financial crisis and withstand it as an organization. One of the sectors hardest (and longest) hit are local governments. They have seen loss of tax revenue and slashing of state support, and they are closest to the people who have lost their jobs, homes and confidence. Now, more than ever, local governments need help in finding new ways to operate, save money and deliver critical services. Our combination of an on-the-ground approach to gathering intelligence about what is working and academic research, and our ability to disseminate that information broadly through our far-reaching networks has helped countless governments to plan for proactive responses rather than reactive ones. The dedicated Alliance staff, our partner organizations and our loyal members are making expanded contributions to this unique community of practice that enables each to perform better than they would on their own. The Alliance for Innovation serves as