

PART I



SOLUTIONS FOR AMERICA: A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH MODEL BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND UNIVERSITIES

Kathleen Ferraiolo and Paul Freedman
Department of Politics, University of Virginia

AS PART OF ITS Solutions for America project, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change created a new model of assessment and evaluation for use by community organizations and local colleges and universities. Dubbed the “hub-and-spoke” model, the Pew Partnership commissioned Kathleen Ferraiolo and Paul Freedman to track the implementation and results of this model over a two-year period (1999–2001). These findings were presented by Professor Freedman at the **Building University-Community Research Partnerships** roundtable held in Charlottesville, Virginia in October 2002.



Paul Freedman of the University of Virginia

SOLUTIONS FOR AMERICA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Solutions for America was a two-year (1999–2001) national research initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change to identify, document, and disseminate information about successful efforts to address tough challenges in communities across the country. Specifically, the initiative was designed to:

- ✦ document successful solutions to critical community problems;
- ✦ showcase the best of research and practice to national audiences;
- ✦ increase the access communities have to practical knowledge about what works; and
- ✦ increase the capacity of community-based nonprofit organizations and local governments to conduct their own research and program evaluation.

PARTICIPATING SITES

Nineteen community organizations representing a range of issues were selected by an advisory board to participate in Solutions for America:

Aiken, SC: Growing into Life (infant mortality)

Arlington, TX: Dental Health for Arlington (access to dental services)

Big Ugly Creek, WV: Step by Step, Inc./West Virginia Dreamers Project
(rural youth empowerment)

Boston, MA: Boston Main Streets (commercial revitalization)

Brockton, MA: MY TURN, Inc. (job training)

Burlington, VT: Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry/Vermont
Development Credit Union (access to capital and credit)

Cedar Rapids, IA: Neighborhood Transportation Service
(job transportation)

Charlottesville, VA: City of Charlottesville (downtown revitalization)

Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (youth mentoring)

Jacksonville, FL: The Bridge of Northeast Florida (youth development)

Jacksonville, FL: Jacksonville Community Council, Inc.
(community issue analysis)

Los Angeles, CA: Beyond Shelter/Housing First for Homeless Families
(homelessness prevention)

Mankato, MN: Region Nine Prevention and Healthy Communities
Network (teen drug and alcohol use)

New York, NY: Children’s Aid Society/Carmel Hill Project
(comprehensive neighborhood revitalization)

Richmond, KY: Kentucky River Foothills Development Council/
Women in Construction (job training for women)

St. Louis, MO: FOCUS St. Louis/Bridges Across Racial Polarization®
(race relations)

Santa Ana, CA: Taller San Jose (job preparation for Latino youth)

Shreveport, LA: Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal
(neighborhood revitalization)

Western North Carolina: HandMade in America/Small Towns
Revitalization Project (rural revitalization)

RESEARCH DESIGN

As part of the effort to document successful community strategies, Solutions implemented an innovative “hub-and-spoke” research design. Each of the nineteen sites—the “spokes”—identified a local research partner with whom they worked over the two-year period of the project. Eighteen of the nineteen research teams included researchers from a local college or university. These local researchers, drawn from schools of social work, architecture, nursing, and from various social science departments, worked in concert with organization staff to design and implement a research strategy (see Appendix 1). The Pew Partnership contracted with each of the research teams, providing support for the local researchers, convening national meetings of researchers and program staff over the course of the project, and providing each site with an additional research fund to defray related expenses. The Partnership also designated the Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR) at Rutgers University to serve as the research “hub,” coordinating the work of the local researchers and overseeing centralized data-gathering tasks.

As a final component of the research design, Paul Freedman and Kathleen Ferraiolo of the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia under-

took a longitudinal evaluation of the Solutions research process. Key program staff members from each site, along with their associated local research partners, were surveyed—by mail, phone, and over the Internet—in the fall and winter of 2000, in the fall of 2001, and in the spring and summer of 2002. This research provides the basis for the present report.

OVERALL EVALUATIONS

Assessments of Solutions for America by program participants were unambiguously positive. As early as the first survey of site staff in the fall of 2000, 91 percent of participants rated their overall experience with the program as “excellent” or “very good” and 94 percent said they would be willing to participate in the program again. Four out of five program staff surveyed, even early on in the research process, agreed that participation in Solutions “has improved my organization’s ability to conduct research.” Sites were particularly enthusiastic about their local research partners, whom they saw as committed to their programs, able to work well with program staff, and instrumental for providing guidance and focus to the research effort. Among the local researchers, assessments were similarly positive. Two-thirds of those surveyed rated their experience with Solutions as “excellent” and all others considered it “very good.” By the end of the program, nine out of ten local researchers indicated that they would work with their local Solutions site again, and three-quarters of the Solutions sites have in fact continued their relationship with their local research partner since the conclusion of the initiative.

These positive assessments came despite the fact that for most participants, particularly the staff members at the nineteen project sites, the research undertaken as part of Solutions was a new experience. Not surprisingly, nearly three-quarters of staff members indicated that their organization had never participated in a project like Solutions, and for almost two-thirds working with a local researcher was a brand-new experience. Even for sites that had previously worked with an outside researcher in some capacity, both the ongoing relationship between the local researcher and site staff throughout the project and the participatory nature of the hub-and-spoke research design were new.

INITIAL MOTIVATIONS

Sites and researchers had distinct but overlapping reasons for deciding to participate in Solutions. For researchers, the opportunity to evaluate a local organization, to contribute to the local community in a new way, and to apply their research expertise to a real-world problem offered an opportunity to move beyond the regular confines of the university setting. “I was very interested in finding projects that formed a bridge between the university and the community,” explained one researcher, “Solutions offered a great opportunity for this.” Similarly, another local research partner said that, for her, one of the primary motivations was “greater involvement in the community surrounding my academic institution.” Other local researchers mentioned opportunities to integrate the Solutions evaluation into their own research and teaching, and the opportunity to “do good” on behalf of their university.

For sites, the opportunity to have their work evaluated and validated by an objective party, particularly one with the prestige of the Pew Partnership behind it, constituted the most important motivation for participation in Solutions. Three-quarters of staff members surveyed indicated that the “opportunity to have your work validated by an outside organization” was extremely important in the decision to participate in Solutions (another fifth said it was “somewhat” important). Site staff recognized their own existing, but sometimes limited, capacity to collect data and conduct program evaluation, and in some cases considered such activities essential to service delivery. One staff member spoke of the “opportunity to conduct an evaluation of our programs,” which “will help [the organization] improve services and better serve the community.” From early on, the Solutions hub-and-spoke approach was designed to enhance the capacity of sites to conduct such program evaluation in a rigorous, objective fashion.

Finally, just as researchers sought to move beyond the university, site staff appeared eager to look beyond their own programs, both through their work with their local researcher as well as through the contacts made at national meetings and other Solutions-related activities. One staff member pointed to the opportunity to “get outside our own small world” in addition to the “credibility [and] opportunity for validation/evaluation in an objective

manner,” as important motivations for participating in Solutions. Similarly, reflecting on his experience at one of the national Solutions meetings, one site staff member commented, “I think what we really brought back was that there are people out there like us working to resolve a serious issue, even if it’s not the same as ours, and we felt encouraged by that.”

BENEFITS TO SITES AND LOCAL RESEARCHERS

There was a strong connection between the sites’ motivations for taking part in Solutions for America and the benefits they experienced from their participation. The validation that the research could confer upon the program, the learning of new research skills, and the prestige of being associated with a national initiative were listed both as considerations in the decision to participate and as benefits of participation. To a great extent, Solutions lived up to participants’ expectations and filled critical organizational needs.

Site-specific benefits. First and foremost, participation in Solutions helped to enhance the sites’ research capacity. In part, this capacity building was brought about through the creation and fostering of a “culture of inquiry”[†] among sites. Solutions required sites to engage in a sustained process of data gathering and empirical analysis: through their work with the local researcher, through the demanding reporting requirements coordinated by the CUPR hub, and through the national meetings organized by the Pew Partnership. These activities served to enhance or inculcate a mindset in which research and evaluation were seen as integral program functions. By the end of the project, 83 percent of site staff indicated that they themselves and their organizations had developed positive attitudes toward evaluation research and had become convinced of its value. These attitudes were not merely concentrated among a few highly involved staff members, but trickled down (and up) throughout the agency. One staff member noted that Solutions had led to a “paradigm shift within our organization from the experience of integrating evaluation into our day-to-day practice.”

Beyond such attitudinal changes, participation in the Solutions research

[†] The term “culture of inquiry” is borrowed from Georgiana Hernández and Mary G. Visser, *Creating a Culture of Inquiry*, James Irvine Foundation, 2001. www.irvine.org.

yielded tangible informational gains as well. Nearly 85 percent of program staff agreed that the Solutions research revealed new information about their program, and more than three-quarters of staff members surveyed agreed that the Solutions research helped them implement new data collection methods and improved their organization's ability to conduct research. Survey respondents reported a high level of involvement in planning or designing the research and providing data to the research partner throughout the Solutions project.

Many staff members found the research to be helpful in validating their prior expectations about the effectiveness of their work. This "validation" by Solutions was seen both as a source of motivation and inspiration for staff members and as a tool organizations could use in seeking out new funding. More than 80 percent of staff members surveyed reported that "the research process has confirmed what my staff and I already knew about the program." One interviewee said that the research not only confirmed what the site staff had suspected, but it also reminded them to keep doing what was working. Several staffers noted that the research findings would be used to demonstrate to funders that "their money is well spent." Another interviewee indicated that his organization's participation in Solutions and the results that emerged from the research were "like getting a Good Housekeeping seal of approval that would allow us to go to funders, to go to our supporters ... and say that we have been looked at and have been found worthy."

Other staff members reported that the Solutions research helped lead to improvements in existing data collection and analysis efforts, as well as to the introduction of new data gathering systems. For some organizations, participation in Solutions helped facilitate improvements in client survey administration, and in focus group sessions; others reported advances in tracking program and client information. More important, these new data are not gathering dust, but are being put to good use. One program staffer explained that, at the conclusion of Solutions, the evaluation process had become more standardized and that he and his colleagues were "much more proactive about building in documentation" to ongoing program operations. Another staff member noted that the tools acquired through Solutions helped his site in "gathering data that's meaningful to the volunteers that we

work with.” “We’re collecting better data, and we’ll be able to use it better,” explained another, who described how his organization had always collected data in some form, but because of Solutions was now asking “new questions” and tracking responses to those questions longitudinally. For other sites, Solutions demonstrated what was particularly effective about program operations, and in some cases this new information helped lead to changes in program practices, such as adding new components to service delivery operations or expanding services to a wider group of clients or geographical area.

Sites have gone on to use the research findings and their participation in Solutions in a number of other concrete ways, including organizational strategic planning sessions, fundraising activities, and sophisticated public relations efforts. One year into the Solutions project, over three-quarters of project staff indicated that the research had helped stimulate dialogue and reflection among staff, board, and volunteers, and nearly 85 percent of staff believed that Solutions was helpful in clarifying program objectives. Since the conclusion of the program, nearly three-quarters of site staff members report that their organization already had or was planning to make use of their participation in Solutions and the research findings in fundraising efforts. It is clear from these reports that the research findings are not sitting on bookshelves, but rather that programs are applying those findings to their work and disseminating them both internally and externally.

Researcher benefits. For their part, the local researchers seemed to find their work with the Solutions sites to be challenging, but engaging and ultimately satisfying in precisely the ways they had anticipated. As noted earlier, these researchers were eager to participate in real-world projects that got them out of the university setting and into the community. Participation in Solutions provided just such an experience. Beyond this, many of the researchers were able to use their Solutions funding to hire research assistants; in all, eleven of the nineteen research teams employed one or more RAs, frequently graduate students working with the local researcher. Additionally, several researchers were able to incorporate their Solutions experience into their teaching. “The comprehensive nature of this project was challenging and a great learning

tool,” one researcher explained. “I tend to talk about my research activities in my research and community practice classes, which helps make them relevant and alive to students.”

Finally, Solutions sites and researchers together benefited from the funds available for research purposes. Five of the sites used these funds to invest in computer hardware, new software, or training for staff. Twelve sites used Solutions funds to defray costs associated with new data gathering tasks, such as survey interviews, focus groups, and data entry. Other sites used the funds to prepare and disseminate their research findings.

CHALLENGES

At times, the Solutions project was as demanding as it was innovative. Clear challenges emerged throughout the research process: staff members and local researchers alike identified a series of hurdles that needed to be overcome, the most pressing of which were the availability of sufficient funding and staff time to devote to data collection and working with the research partner. In closed-ended questions asking site staff members about research challenges, more than half of respondents agreed that “it was difficult to identify manageable methods of collecting data on program operations.” In part this was a question of expertise, and it was precisely this that the local researchers were able to provide. However, making data collection and analysis manageable also requires sufficient resources to conduct critical tasks such as client interviewing, data entry, and the preparation and dissemination of research reports. Here, the local researchers—particularly when aided by research assistants—were again able to subsidize some but certainly not all of the costs.

Staff time was clearly the most pressing challenge for many organizations. Several sites expressed a desire to have had access to additional funds to either compensate existing (often overworked) staff for their work on the research or to hire a new staff person specifically for the purposes of data collection and analysis. These concerns seemed most pressing at the beginning of the research process; one site staff member indicated that “we did not have adequate staff for database design and data entry. We wasted time in the beginning on nonessential data issues.” All told, more than a third of re-

spondents disagreed with the statement, “there was sufficient staff and local researcher time available to implement the research process.”

Some interviewees suggested that the challenges of evaluation research are felt differently by administrative and field staff. As one individual put it, “personally, for me, [the research] is a joy, but I don’t have to collect all the data.” Usually the staff is “pretty overwhelmed” with their day-to-day activities, this interviewee reported, and some of them consider the data collection to be a burden “they could live without.”

These challenges, however, tended to be mitigated by the strength of the relationship between the sites and the local research partner. A large majority of researchers (at least 80 percent) agreed that site staff understood their role in the research effort; that they worked well with site staff; and that site staff were intellectually committed to the research effort. For their part, at least 80 percent of program staff respondents agreed that the research partner understood the organization’s work, worked well with staff, and provided direction and focus to the research effort. One of the reasons that these partnerships appear to have worked so well is that each group brought a unique set of skills to bear. Local researchers who participated in Solutions were more intimately involved in analyzing and interpreting data and preparing reports, while site staff members reported more involvement in providing data to researchers. There seems to have been an informal division of labor between researchers and site staff, with each party more involved in completing some tasks than others. University researchers tended to be more involved in designing the research, analyzing and interpreting the data, and preparing reports for Solutions. Site staffers, in contrast, were more involved in data collection and staff training.

That researchers and staff members tended to agree on the nature of their relationship and that they overwhelmingly tended to work well together suggests that the parties experienced joint ownership of the research process and outcomes. However, in several cases such joint ownership was absent, communication between the researcher and program staff was poor, and in a small handful of cases sites and researchers got off to a rocky start and never fully recovered.

Despite the challenges the Solutions sites faced during the research

process, in general most did not find the process to be overly burdensome. A number of factors enabled agencies and local governments to meet challenges successfully: the involvement and enthusiasm of organizational staff and board members; a high level of preparation and organization in the early stages of the research; the availability of the research fund provided by the Pew Partnership; and a hands-on, engaged local researcher all helped to ease the burden of conducting program evaluation research. As a result, in each of two surveys, at least two-thirds of program staff reported a very low burden associated with participating in Solutions, and 84 percent of program respondents disagreed that “the data collection was too ambitious for my organization.”

When it comes to mainstreaming evaluation research—i.e., continuing what began under Solutions—the related concerns of funding and staff time are paramount. As one interviewee put it, “finding the kind of resources that we had under Pew” will be a challenge to continuing the Solutions research. Another interviewee explained that, although he wanted to continue the work, he did not have the time or a staff person to devote to the research process. There are, therefore, critical questions relating to the post-Solutions transition that remain to be addressed. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that, as noted earlier, nearly 94 percent of site staff members indicated that they would participate in Solutions again, and that three-quarters are continuing some form of collaboration with their Solutions research partner.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Can universities, foundations and funding agencies, local governments, and nonprofit organizations work together to mainstream research and evaluation while improving program operations? The lessons from Solutions suggest that the answer is yes, but challenges and questions remain.

The hub-and-spoke model has real potential to bring together researchers and service providers from a single community. Together, these teams can foster a culture of inquiry, develop new and improved mechanisms for data gathering and analysis, and generate new information that serves to stimulate dialogue within organizations, improve program operations, and provide critical feedback to funders and other community stakeholders.

Local researchers are the key to the hub-and-spoke model, but it is important to recognize the collaborative nature of the enterprise: the local researchers were not air-dropped into the sites in order to gather data and report back to the hub. Rather, they worked hand-in-hand with program staff to integrate evaluation research into the regular operations of the agency. In most cases this process is ongoing, as witnessed by the three-quarters of sites that are continuing to work with their local researcher in some capacity.

Funding agencies should recognize the potential for the local research partnership to provide valuable insight into program operations. Whether or not such partnerships are embedded in a full-blown hub-and-spoke model, funders can realize significant “bang for the buck” by building evaluation research into program operations with the help of a local, university-based researcher. The clear need in this regard is not only to support the efforts of the researcher, but to provide ample staff, time, and resources to conduct the data gathering and analysis.

Colleges and universities stand to gain by fostering collaboration between faculty members and community organizations. Certainly academic institutions can facilitate such research through salary support, but there are other steps that may be equally critical. Course load reduction is one important step that universities can take, as is the opportunity for faculty to combine this kind of research into pedagogical activities, such as graduate research seminars. Universities can also foster less tangible (but no less important) incentives, such as counting this kind of community-based research as service when it comes to tenure and promotion, and promoting such work within the institution. Just as practitioners need to develop a culture of inquiry that values empirical research, so universities may need to adopt and communicate to faculty the position that this kind of research is valued within the institution.