Common Principles and Emerging Practices in Social Capital

Social capital – or the value that arises from connections, networks, and relationships – can help human services programs improve participant outcomes. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), RTI International, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's NC IMPACT Initiative conducted a national program scan, an expert panel, case studies, site visits, and a literature review to examine how social capital elements can be an important ingredient to overall program success. This document highlights common principles and emerging practices to inform practitioners who help participants build and use social capital to improve outcomes related to poverty, employment, and well-being.

See our **handbook** for more details, or visit **https://aspe.hhs.gov/social-capital** for more resources.

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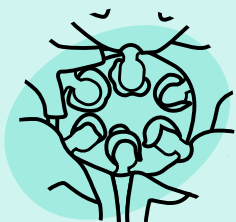
Common Principles for Social Capital Development

Our work suggests that before individual social capital practices can be implemented, organizations and programs should be grounded in certain principles. These can be referred to as ideas, convictions, or values, and they form the foundation of social-capital-based approaches.

People at the Center

Many social capital programs we studied explicitly aim to center individuals or families by viewing participants as the experts, inviting them to drive the goals and services, and using staff as facilitators and supporters instead of directors. These programs also try to understand how trauma may affect participant engagement and rapport development. When participants are listened to and given the autonomy to help drive the process, they may be more likely to feel cared for, respected, and able to develop trusting, reciprocal relationships with each other and with program staff and volunteers.

Relationships as Assets

Generally, staff and participants of successful social-capital-based programs consider social capital a critical asset. It can be as important to the work as the organization's building or its bank account. Thus, program leaders seek to build, nurture, leverage, and monitor social capital.

Staff and Participants as Partners

Some of the programs we reviewed give participants agency to use the program's structure and scope in ways that work for them. One way to do this is to put participants and staff or volunteers on equal footing, attempting to minimize any sense of an uneven power dynamic. In such an environment, participants feel empowered to set their own goals and to take the lead in developing a plan to achieve them.

Cultural Competence

Programs that embody cultural competence promote positive and effective interactions with diverse cultures through attitudes, perspectives, behaviors, and policies. Implementing cultural competence can be quite challenging for human services agencies, as staff and volunteers may have lived experiences and cultural backgrounds very different from those of program participants. Nonetheless, cultural competence is a vital principle of any program that significantly values social relationships.
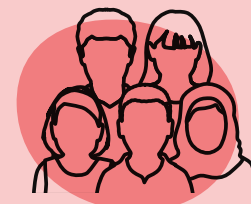
Emotional Intelligence

Some organizations we examined screen for emotional intelligence in their hiring processes or provide ongoing emotional intelligence training for staff or volunteers. Emotional intelligence is the capacity to effectively navigate emotions and use them to improve, rather than hinder, decision-making. It can lead to stronger bonds and trust (for example, by naming our emotions or accurately recognizing others' feelings). Emotional intelligence helps us navigate sensitive interactions, so it can be a particularly important quality for staff and volunteers.

Emerging Practices in Social Capital Approaches

The following emerging practices are frequently used for developing social capital in the human service organizations we reviewed. The practices are considered emerging—not best or promising—because they are not based on rigorous evaluations.
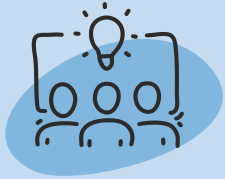
Peer Groups

Peer-group or cohort approaches can help program participants share experiences, build stronger networks, and develop more personal relationships. Group members may tend to provide more encouragement, feel more accountable to each other, and, in at least some cases, sense increased progress toward their goals.

Meaningful Engagement

The programs we examined generally use longer-term, meaningful engagement to build trust and stronger communities of support. Through such engagement, participants build positive, reciprocal relationships that improve individual and community outcomes. The quality and intensity of relationships seem to be more important than the duration of those relationships.
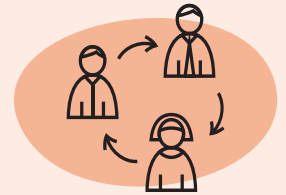
Leveraging Organizational Relationships

Service providers' relationships with other community organizations may open doors for program participants, allowing them to more easily build their own one-on-one bridging or linking connections. Organizational relationships may also reinforce organizational accountability, as administrators seek to protect their personal or organizational connections by ensuring that program participants are well prepared.

Technology

Some programs use technology as a tool to help build community among the people they serve, such as youth, or as a means to easily communicate with and support peer participants by, for instance, facilitating parents' coordination of child care or rides to school. Other programs use technology to work with participants, or they enable participants to use technology directly. For example, an online journal about how participants have helped others and what they have received in return reflects how they build and use social capital through trusting and reciprocal relationships.
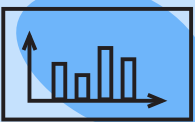
Using Data to Inform Decisions

Most programs we examined are attempting to employ stronger data practices to inform social-capital-building activities, regardless of their current capacity for doing so. Organizations are also using data on social capital to communicate results to funders and community members, and some use data to determine the most effective aspects of their social capital programs.

Fostering Opportunities for Organic Connections

Organizations purposefully use tools such as physical space, events, and program structure to facilitate the development of organic personal connections. Whether in the form of structured group interactions or more casual mingling or introductory opportunities, this type of engagement can include everyone from peers to board members, from volunteers to meal delivery drivers.

Qualified Individuals or Alumni in Programming and Staffing

Intentionally hiring former participants and others with similar life experiences as participants can enhance the authenticity of social capital programs. This shared history allows participants to more easily develop trust and rapport with program staff. It can also reinforce participants' confidence in their ability to build social capital by providing them a safe environment in which to start doing so.

Emphasis on Accountability

Explicit written or verbal agreements or commitments about the nature of a programmatic relationship may offer greater clarity and accountability regarding expectations for each person and for interactions. These agreements do not mandate but clarify the relationship. Accountability is mutual and requires program buy-in. Because some participants have experienced repeated broken commitments in their lives, it is especially important for organizations to fulfill their side of any agreement.