Prevention Institute

Putting prevention at the center of community well-being

COLLABORATION MATH

Collaboration Math is a tool intended to help organizations from diverse disciplines work together. It enables them to better understand each other's perspectives and to identify the strengths and gaps in their partnership. This tool is designed to eliminate misconceptions, clarify the benefits of collaboration, suggest what needs to be better understood or studied, and identify key players that may be missing.

Each group in a collaborative provides key information about its organization according to a common set of categories. Specific categories vary based on the particular collaboration; however, typical examples include:

- **DEFINITION OF PROBLEM:** What language does each organization use to define the issue?
- **KEY ISSUES:** What are each organization's priorities relating to the issue?
- **DATA:** What information does each organization collect, and how does it collect it?
- **FUNDING:** What funding sources and other resources does each organization bring?
- **TRAINING:** What expertise can each organization share with other participants; who does each organization typically train?
- **PARTNERS:** With what other types of groups is each organization connected?
- **SOLUTIONS/OUTCOMES:** What specific objectives has each organization set in relation to the issue?

Once the information is compiled, a facilitator can help the groups compute the "math." For example, entries in the **Data** column can be "added": in other words, collaboration greatly increases the amount of information available to each of the participants. Entries in the **Definition** column are "averaged": for diverse groups to work together, a common way of defining and speaking about the issue needs to be agreed upon. **Training** "multiplies" the capacity of the individual groups and of the coalition: by sharing expertise and methodologies, participants strengthen their ability to achieve success. And by "dividing" up the responsibility for the overall work, the efforts required of each group are diminished. This "math" typically plays out as conversation and analysis during which groups discuss how they can make best use of their diverse backgrounds and resources.

The benefits of collaboration grow exponentially as more groups are added and more categories explored. A sample of a partial *Collaboration Math* matrix is on the next page.

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EXAMPLE: Healthy Eating Coalition

A coalition for promoting healthy eating might include nutritionists and members from public planning and social services departments. By pooling approaches into a comprehensive effort, programs can complement and reinforce each other. Social services may offer welfare benefits, but without local markets offering healthy foods, food stamps are simply subsidizing poor diets. On the other hand, public planners can't bring markets into a neighborhood if its residents can't afford the food. Thus, a coordinated effort is needed. But even when the healthy options are available, people often go with the familiar, less-healthy foods. Learning how to prepare healthy foods and being inspired to do so are just as important as having the resources to eat well. Nutritionists can provide such training. Also, they can help improve food stamp programs by drawing on the greater success of WIC vouchers. By recognizing each other's expertise, these coalition members can address nutrition from a more systems-level perspective.

EXAMPLE: HEALTHY EATING COALITION
(This is a sample; expected levels of detail would be greater)

PARTICIPANT	DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM	DATA	TRAINING	SOLUTIONS/ OUTCOMES
NUTRITIONIST	Poor nutrition is a result of poor food choices	Dietary intake data	Choosing healthy foods, food purchase, & food preparation Promoting WIC	Give people the motivation, skills, & opportunity, to prepare & eat nutritious foods
SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT	Poor nutrition is a result of inadequate household resources	Participation rates in public assistance and federal nutrition programs	Who is eligible & how do they apply for benefits	Get people enrolled in benefit programs
PUBLIC PLANNING DEPARTMENT	Poor nutrition is a result of a lack of supermarkets or other food retail options	Location of supermarkets & food retail outlets	Policy options to attract food retail business	Get supermarkets & other sources for fresh & affordable foods into neighborhoods
MATH	**AVERAGE**	**SUM**	**PRODUCT**	**PRODUCT**
IMPLICATIONS	■ **Build a more complete picture:** ADD data for a more compelling and well-substantiated argument. ■ **Create a common language:** AVERAGE diverse perspectives. ■ **Reinforce the benefits of collaboration:** Assets are ADDED and MULTIPLIED. Responsibilities are DIVIDED among member groups. ■ **Design a comprehensive strategy:** Take advantage of interdisciplinary membership and pool approaches.			

The above groups come from very different backgrounds, but it should be noted that the *Collaboration Math* tool could also be used to facilitate collaboration between similar organizations, such as various agencies within a public health department.

Collaboration Math has been piloted successfully across the country to facilitate the early stages of collaborative work. However, because it pools and clarifies the diverse perspectives of coalition members, *Collaboration Math* also lays the foundations for comprehensive strategy development. In that sense, the *Collaboration Math* tool is designed to complement and inform Prevention Institute's *Spectrum of Prevention*, a tool that promotes multifaceted activities as the best practice for effective prevention. By working through Collaboration Math, participants will see the fruits of their efforts grow exponentially.

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Please note that since this tool is still in development, we ask that it not be disseminated, and would appreciate any feedback regarding its use and effectiveness.