



From Idea to Impact

Collaboration Lab: Investing in Leaders in Danville, Virginia

Lead partners: Danville Regional Foundation, Healthy Places by Design, Tamarack Institute

The Big Idea

The Dan River Region borders North Carolina and Virginia. The region includes the City of Danville and Pittsylvania County, Virginia and Caswell County, North Carolina. The region has a deep historical context and a racially mixed population. Formerly a centre for rail transportation, tobacco and textiles, the economy of the Dan River Region has shifted significantly. This shift has resulted in high levels of poverty and disparity. The region is focused on building a more diversified and thriving local economy that creates equitable opportunities for all residents.

Revitalizing an economy is not enough. A thriving community needs a diverse network of community leaders who are willing to invest their time and human capital. The Danville Regional Foundation identified the need to revitalize the collaborative spirit in the Dan River Region. In 2020, the Collaboration Lab was born.



“Collaboration Lab has had a significant influence on the strategic direction of the Danville Regional Foundation and this region. We believe that building a culture of collaboration, where more people believe that transformation is possible that they have a significant role in achieving it, is the foundation of a resilient thriving community. This partnership has allowed us to activate leaders, shift mindsets and build the skills necessary to create community change.”

– Annie Martinie, Danville Regional Foundation

The Collaboration Lab is reinventing impact by building a culture of collaboration in the Dan River Region. For the past three years, 15 to 25 community leaders representing different sectors and perspectives learn together, explore collaboration, and launch a new collaborative or support existing collaborations and networks. Across the Region, collaboration has deepened and thrived as new connections are made, new leaders emerge, and new resources are brought to the community.



Collaboration Lab is a partnership between Danville Regional Foundation, Tamarack Institute, and Healthy Places by Design. The partnership has evolved over the three cohorts. The Collaboration Lab alumni are active in contributing to the design of the curriculum.

With collaborative leadership at the core of the program’s mission, members participate in a learning journey in which they explore how to create a stronger Dan River Region through cross-sector collaboration. Each cohort learns together how collaborative leadership and system-wide approaches yield practices capable of transformation. (Source: Reinventing Impact – Collaboration Lab Syllabus)

The Progress Made Together

The Collaboration Lab is a co-designed 10-month curriculum for emerging and current collaborative leaders in the Dan River Region. The co-design team meets monthly to review and refine the curriculum content. The co-design team includes the [Danville Regional Foundation](#), [Healthy Places by Design](#) and [Tamarack Institute](#).

Collaborative leadership is both an inner journey, exploring the mindsets which make collaboration possible, and an outer journey of building connections, a shared purpose and moving change forward.

The Collaborative Lab experience is designed to achieve six objectives:

1. Develop a deeper self-awareness, dialogue, and ability to implement, support, and create system-wide collaborative approaches.
2. Build and further networks and relationships with leaders in the region to support one another in collaborative efforts.
3. Identify strategies to meaningfully engage the appropriate stakeholders in a facilitated and sustained collaboration.
4. Apply collaborative approaches to city-level or regional problems.
5. Complete a planning sequence for a practical collaborative experience with potential for real-world application/implementation.
6. Collectively shift the Dan River Region to adopt a culture of collaboration to tackle system-wide issues



The Community Impact – Sharing Results

Since 2020, the impact on the Dan River Region has been significant. The Collaboration Lab curriculum continues to evolve to meet the adaptive needs of the community

The Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact provides a set of indicators to measure the progress and impact of medium stage collaborative efforts. It is useful to understand the impact of Collaboration Lab through the perspective of these measures. While not directly a collective impact process, the Collaboration Lab experience seeks to enhance individual behaviour change, organizational behaviour change, resource flows and system and policy impacts across the Dan River Region. The table below highlights the progress that is being made through the three-cohort experience of Collaboration Lab participants and their community collaborative initiatives.

Indicator	Impact
<i>Individual or Organizational Behaviour Change</i>	
<p>Individuals report increased awareness of issues surrounding the desired behaviour change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the annual evaluation of the Collaboration Lab Experience, participants have shared the following perspectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Didn't fully understand the magnitude of collaboration and the impact it could have on the community</i> ○ <i>all a new learning experience, as weave into new roles and foster new relationships, still applying the collaboration tools</i> ○ <i>spending time building trust and get to know people</i>
<p>Individuals report improved knowledge of the desired behaviour change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing collaborative tables are strengthened in the Dan River Region • A Collaboration Lab alumni group has been formed and collaborative partnership are being formed including current members and alumni • 10 collaborative pilots have been launched to advance collaboration in the region • Existing collaborations within the Region have been strengthened and have better alignment and coordination • Collaboration Lab individuals and alumni are stepping into new leadership roles across the region
<p>Organizations report increased awareness of issues surrounding the desired behaviour change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Collaboration Lab design and curriculum is being piloted in other communities led by Healthy Places by Design

Indicator	Impact
<i>Funding and Resource Flow Change</i>	
<p>Existing public resources are directed toward evidence-based strategies in the targeted issue area/system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danville Regional Foundation has provided targeted financial resources to grow collaboration capacity • Collaboration Lab Alumni have access to additional funding for their community efforts
<p>New public resources are committed to evidence-based strategies in the target issue area/system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danville Regional Foundation was recently the recipient of a \$13 Million dollar Mackenzie Scott donation to advance its effectiveness in the community
<i>Policy and System Level Change</i>	
<p>Increased public involvement in an issue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three cohorts of Collaboration Lab have involved more than 60 community leaders
<p>Increased breadth of partners in support of an issue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership with David Chrislip to survey Dan River Region in the Civic Capacity Index which highlighted community strengths and challenges which led to ongoing community focus on equity and inclusion • Sixteen Collab Lab Alumni attended Tamarack’s Community Change Experience in Delray Beach, Florida, building national partnerships and launching new collaborative projects.
<p>Increased media coverage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tamarack Institute hosted webinar on Collaboration Lab experience • Articles on the Healthy Places By Design, Tamarack Institute and Danville Regional Foundation websites with a collective reach of 50,000 individuals
<p>Public opinion changes to support of messages and goals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration Lab article published in Grantmakers in Health Newsletter – Activating the Potential of Residents to Lead Community Transformation • Giving Compass – Curated Article – How to Empower Collaborative Community Transformation

Tamarack Institute - A Consulting and Learning Partner

Tamarack has played an instrumental role as a curriculum design partner. Tamarack brings unique knowledge and skills about collaborative leadership and community change. The organization is also able to draw on a wide network of social change leaders, their ideas, and experiences. Tamarack has also leveraged its network to bring in leaders as guest speakers. Tamarack co-facilitates curriculum sessions with the team. Individual and peer coaching is provided to the Collaboration Lab participants which accelerates their collaborative leadership work. Below are some of the roles Tamarack has played as a consulting and learning partner in this work:

- Co-design of the Collaboration Lab curriculum modules with Danville Regional Foundation and Healthy Places by Design
- Development of new tools and resources to enhance the collaborative leadership experiences in the Dan River Region and globally
- Partnership development between Healthy Places by Design and the Danville Regional Foundation by expanding knowledge and skills about the experience of investing in collaborative leaders
- Sharing of the Collaboration Lab approach with other global partners including Place Matters (UK) and partners in Australia
- Validation of the Collaboration Lab approach including a co-authored paper published in Grantmakers in Health, invitations to present at Grantmaker conferences, and a webinar highlighting the Collaboration Lab hosted by the Tamarack Institute and the development of a **From Idea to Impact Case Story**

Sharing Lessons Learned

The following five lessons or insights have emerged from hosting three cohort.

1. **Co-Design leverages the expertise of the partners and participants** – The Collaboration Lab experience is intentionally designed to both have a core curriculum in place but adaptive to the specific needs and interests of each cohort. The curriculum team meets monthly to review the progress of learners and to adapt content. Participants are also regularly invited to weigh in on the curriculum content and design. The partners on the curriculum team, Collaboration Lab participants and alumni contribute to the co-design of the curriculum and have identified shifts in the curriculum model and shared learning content.

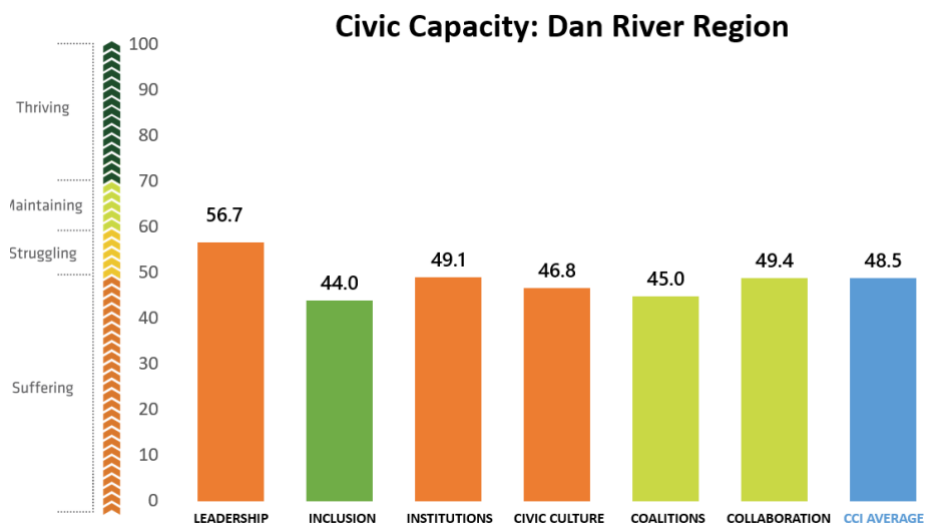
2. **Investing in collaborative leadership strengthens community capacity** – Effective collaboration requires intention, attention to the process and investing in the people around the collaborative table. The existing and emerging collaborative processes in the Dan River have been strengthened by the increased capacity. Simply by being selected to join the cohort, some participants viewed it as a sign that gave them confidence and validation that they are indeed leaders. Several members of the Health Collaborative have participated in each of the three cohorts. This has led to a common and shared language across the Health Collaborative leadership team and a deeper understanding of how to effectively navigate complex health and social challenges.

3. **Understanding the history and context of the community is key** – Every community has an existing network of leaders who are creating a path forward. Tapping into the wisdom that already exists in the community is important. Acknowledging the leadership gaps and investing in emerging leaders can strengthen the identity and economic prospects of a region. In the current cohort, a subgroup of participants are coming together to discuss how to integrate arts and entrepreneurship in the region, an untapped avenue for new business opportunities in the region.



“We had all of these great partnerships in the community, and they really were great, and we referred people to them all of the time, but these partnerships weren’t succeeding. The reason they weren’t succeeding is because we weren’t asking our residents what they needed. A big learning point for me was to go back, engage our residents and find out what they really needed. I never would have done that without Collab Lab”

Collaboration Lab Participant



4. **An equity focus is essential to collaboration curriculum** – Each year Collaboration Lab participants are invited to assess the current civic capacity of the region. Civic capacity is measured through forty-two descriptors clustered into six domain areas - leadership, inclusion, institutions, civic culture, coalitions, and collaboration. The first two cohorts have consistently rated inclusion as an area which requires additional focus and investment. Inclusion is the extent to which the community addresses challenges—including those of race, discrimination, and social justice—in inclusive and constructive ways. The Collaboration Lab experience seeks to directly influence this indicator. Each cohort in the Dan River Region adds to this localized index each year, and it's discussed further during one of the monthly sessions to uncover and discuss the results
5. **Collaboration Lab participants are equipped to take their leadership to the next level** – Since the first cohort launched in September 2020, Collaboration Lab alumni are stepping into new leadership roles in the Region, State and Nationally. These leaders will continue to grow, transition into new roles, and identify ways their collaborative leadership skills can be put to use both in the region and beyond. The cohort is intentionally made up of diverse members, from all life and career stages, those in formal and informal leadership roles, and with a variety of experiences, from elected officials to grassroots leaders.



Collaboration Lab helped me redefine what leadership means. When we reflected on our collaborative leadership role models and what we admired about them, I was able to see those same qualities in myself. I went from, 'they should do this, they should do that' to 'we should do this'. I stopped waiting for a solution outside of myself. I stopped waiting for a savior. It is all our responsibility to engage in leadership, and I am a leader.

Collaboration Lab Participant

To Learn More:

- Learn more about the [Collaboration Lab](#) in the Dan River Region
- Learn more about the [Civic Capacity Index](#)
- Learn more about [Healthy Places by Design](#) and their work in community change
- Find out how the [Danville Regional Foundation](#) is investing in community and civic leadership