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The Fidelity–Adaptation Relationship in Non-Evidence-Based Programs and its Implication for Program Evaluation

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Based on our experience in helping design, implement, and evaluate a non-evidence-based program, we explore a non-conventional fidelity and adaptation relationship and its implications for program evaluation. We find that in non-evidence-based interventions, program fidelity and adaptation may not be competitors but serve to complement each other. This non-conventional relationship leads to expanded roles of evaluation in program design and implementation.

KEYWORDS: fidelity and adaptation; non-evidence-based program; process evaluation; program evaluation

Introduction

Large-scale program intervention is often a structured process, which has drawn considerable attention from evaluators across disciplines (Gartner et al., 2006; Hawe et al., 2004; Hulscher et al., 2003; Kinsman et al., 2002). Although varying in focus from program to program, such an intervention generally starts with program design; when the philosophy of intervention is expressed, stakeholders are identified, action strategies are formulated, and expected outcomes are
defined. The intervention then proceeds to program implementation and evaluation. When intervention is actually executed, unexpected problems are uncovered and resolved, and the impact of the program is assessed.

Two competing forces are important to program evaluation in this process. The first is related to program fidelity, or ‘the degree to which delivery of an intervention adheres to the protocol or program model originally developed’ (Mowbray et al., 2003: 315). Is implementation of the intervention consistent with the program philosophy and action strategies? Are all the necessary stakeholders involved and engaged? And to what extent do the implementers of the program try to achieve expected outcomes? The second concerns program adaptation, which requests flexibility in allowing program implementers to adjust the program to the changing time, target populations, localities, and other factors.

Evidence is abundant in the literature in support of both the competing forces. Based on research on interventions in various fields (e.g. Connell et al., 1985; Emshoff et al., 2003; George et al., 2000), positive effects of fidelity on the effectiveness of interventions were found. To make a case for maximizing fidelity in program implementation, Szulanski and Winter (2002) argued that the best program is one that is followed as closely as possible, and that adapting a successful model is a mistake. Similarly, Calsyn et al. (1997) found that changing a program in any significant way will reduce its effectiveness, whereas Boruch and Gomez (1977) believed that modification to a program makes evaluation across different settings difficult.

At the other end of the spectrum, proponents of program adaptation often find a legitimate need to tailor a program template to local circumstances, available resources, and the different social and cultural background of participants (Bachrach, 1988; Hohnmann and Shear, 2002). According to these researchers, program fidelity is neither automatic nor easy to achieve (O’Connor et al., 2007). In fact, many studies over the years have shown that, unlike claims made by program developers, very few programs can be or have been implemented with full fidelity (Berman and McLaughlin, 1977; Domitrovich and Greenberg, 2000; Mayer and Davidson, 2000; Tricker and Davis, 1988). When circumstances change, significant change or reinvention (Eveland et al., 1997; Rogers, 1995) is often the only way to preserve program effectiveness.

Although the debate over the relative importance of program fidelity and adaptation continues in the literature, increasing numbers of researchers realize the necessity of balancing the two. In an excellent review of the literature on interventions in substance abuse prevention, for example, Backer (2001: 41) concluded that ‘attention to both fidelity and adaptation is essential for successful implementation of science-based substance abuse prevention programs’. Based on their experience in aligning evaluation efforts for a multilevel intervention program in the nonprofit sector, Yang et al. (2004: 504) acknowledged the importance of balancing ‘flexibility and uniformity’. In a framework that motivates community participation to enhance program outcomes, Castro et al. (2004) found an innovative program design strategy by developing hybrid programs that ‘build in’ adaptation to enhance program fit while maximizing fidelity of implementation and program effectiveness.

In this article, we continue the discussion on the relationship between program fidelity and adaptation. We argue that the current analysis on the fidelity–adaptation
relationship has been targeting primarily science-based or evidence-based intervention, which is ‘theory-driven, has activities related to theory, and has been reasonably well implemented and well evaluated’ (Backer, 2001: 10). As such, the current fidelity–adaptation debate takes for granted program designs that preceded program implementations, without asking whether program designs themselves should also be subject to evaluation and whether program adaptation may help refine program designs and thus contribute to defining program fidelity. In addition, in the current context of fidelity–adaptation analysis, program effectiveness is measured with the ‘goals’ of the program given. Interpretation of program effectiveness – or the lack of it – is to a great extent reduced to whether program implementers have complied with the original protocol of the program (fidelity), have made necessary adjustment (adaptation), or have balanced fidelity and adaptation.

Although this ‘neutralization’ of program designs may not be a problem when dealing with science- or evidence-based interventions, we believe that it will probably hinder the operation – and undermine the evaluation of effectiveness – of non-evidence-based programs. Unlike a science- or evidence-based program, non-evidence-based interventions are often innovative and have no track records or prior scientific foundation. Sometimes they are simply based on the values or preferences of the funders or sponsors. As a result, their program designs are often adaptive in nature and subject to modifications called on from the field of implementation. Stated differently, in a non-evidence-based intervention, fidelity criteria themselves are relative; not only is adaptation in implementation necessary for the success of the intervention, it is also an important way to help modify program design so that the fidelity criteria of the program can be better defined. Furthermore, with an adaptive program design, evaluation should cover not only the implementation process but also the program design. A lack of program effectiveness does not necessarily imply that the program has not been well implemented. Instead, it may indicate a necessity for program refinement or modification.

We explicate this argument based on our experience in helping design, implement, and evaluate the Unleashing Resources Initiative (URI) administered by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. A large-scale, non-evidence-based, ongoing intervention in the nonprofit sector, the initiative is designed to strengthen the field of philanthropy and volunteerism. We show that (a) in this innovative program, adaptation and fidelity can coexist peacefully and constructively; (b) by adhering to the fundamental philosophy of the program, adaptation becomes a natural way to implement the intervention; and (c) careful adaptation helps reformulate the design of the program. We also show that in this non-evidence-based intervention, the roles of evaluation are expanded: it not only assesses implementation, but also helps program design.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. We first present the basic theme of the URI, highlighting its nature as a value-based program. We then describe activities in designing, implementing, and evaluating the intervention, and we examine the relationship between fidelity and adaptation in the whole process and how this relationship has influenced our effort in the evaluation of the program. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of our experience, explaining how our argument may affect the general practice of non-evidence-based program interventions and evaluation.
The Unleashing Resources Initiative as a Non-Evidence-Based Program

The Unleashing Resources Initiative (URI) is a strategic intervention program designed by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to strengthen and connect emerging leaders in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism. Inspired by the core values of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the initiative seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- increased access, visibility, and engagement of three underengaged primary groups – including women, youth, and communities of color – in giving;
- more collaboration among the six population groups – including the three primary groups, plus new wealth creators, social entrepreneurs, and corporate social innovators – to support giving;
- improved access to useful knowledge about giving;
- improved access to and use of tools about giving;
- more innovative ways of giving that emerge from these outcomes;
- greater influence on mainstream giving by the primary groups;
- increased giving among the six population groups on the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s social change interests.

To this end, and since 2000, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation has committed about $90 million to more than 260 projects through a comprehensive programming strategy that emphasizes supporting emerging leaders and donors, creating and sharing knowledge, and building tools for nonprofit sustainability and innovative giving. Among the most prominent grantees of this initiative are GuideStar, Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, Network for Good, VolunteerMatch, and Women’s Funding Network, which are all important players in the nonprofit sector.

The initiative has the following important characteristics. First, it is a value-based program. The fundamental philosophy underlying the initiative – to strengthen and connect emerging leaders in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism – was not based on any scientific theory or proven evidence. Rather, it was derived from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s core values (see Box 1), which, among other things, emphasize innovation and helping people help themselves. Although these values are well accepted socially, it was not very clear whether and how they can be the backbone of an intervention program.

Second, the initiative had almost no precedence on this scale. Foundations and corporations have long been generous in giving (Giving USA Foundation, 2004, 2005). But prior to the URI, few of them had designed any large-scale, systematic, and coherent program to promote philanthropy and volunteerism, not to mention programs that specifically target women, youth, and communities of color, who were among the most underengaged groups in the nonprofit sector. The more common perception of a potential giver is typically an older, rich White man who gives away his money to pursue a certain philanthropic mission.

Third, because the three primary groups (i.e. women, youth, and communities of color) had been underengaged, knowledge about their giving behavior and tools to encourage and facilitate their giving were not readily available. As a
result, the initiative needed to deal with myriad unknowns about its major stakeholders. In summary, the initiative was based on the moral value of increasing the visibility of underrepresented groups of youth, women, and communities of color in philanthropy and volunteerism. However, there was no scientific evidence to point out how to achieve the purpose of URI.

The nature of URI – innovative, but without scientific evidence – presented a series of challenges to the design and implementation of the program. While worthy, would a program specifically targeting women, youth, and communities of color be effective? How should such a program be designed? What were the most important issues facing these groups in terms of promoting their giving? How should one draw a line between adhering to the fundamental philosophy of the initiative and allowing great flexibility in implementation? Clearly, how to approach fidelity and adaptation in both the design and implementation stages of the initiative was critical in determining the success of the intervention.

**Fidelity and Adaptation in URI**

The Unleashing Resources Initiative (URI) has been a two-phase endeavor. Phase I, or the ‘design’ phase, started in September 1999 and called for a two-year period to study the validity and feasibility of launching a philanthropy and volunteerism program to ‘unleash resources for common good’. Specifically, the work in this phase aimed at

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\ldots \text{learning more about the changing context in philanthropy, identifying key partners, testing program assumptions and designs, supporting program models aligned with the Philanthropy and Volunteerism vision, and making decisions about whether to move into a second phase of the initiative and, ultimately, designing Phase II. (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2003: 3)}
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One of the major achievements of the URI Phase I was the development of an integrated philanthropy and volunteerism programming strategy, which prescribed the ultimate purpose of the initiative; defined its intended impacts, methods, and partners; and explicitly granted permission for adaptation in implementation.
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(see Figure 1). Essentially, this strategy became the blueprint for developing fidelity criteria or the logic model to assess the fit of future implementation to the initiative. It also paved the way for constructive adaptation in implementation.

The URI Phase II, or the ‘implementation’ phase, began in 2002. By the end of 2006, more than 260 projects had been funded to accomplish the goals set forth by the initiative. In accordance with the programming strategy developed in Phase I, these projects were loosely grouped into three clusters – leaders and donors, knowledge, and tools – which comprised the following:

The leaders and donors cluster consists of projects fostering the emergence of the leaders in the field of philanthropy and volunteering. The knowledge cluster contains projects intended to generate knowledge bases that aid the work in the field of philanthropy and volunteering in general, and the projects in other clusters of the URI in particular. The tools cluster contains projects developing tools meant to be useful for both projects within the URI and in the general field of philanthropy and volunteering. (Yang et al., 2004: 495)

**Maintaining and Promoting Fidelity**

The URI made a conscious effort to ensure that the program was designed and implemented according to its underlying philosophy (e.g. to strengthen and

- Ultimate Purpose of the Initiative: to improve the ‘common good’ of society, particularly for those people and communities most underrepresented, underserved, and under-engaged.
- Intended Impacts: the ‘unleashing’ of time, money, and know-how toward the vision of a mutually responsible and just society in which all have the ability and will to give toward the common good.
- Intended Methods: to be applied in an integrated manner as the local context dictates.
- Intended Partners: the populations to be engaged, divided into the primary groups of youth, women, and communities of color; and facilitating groups of social entrepreneurs, corporate social innovators, and new wealth creators.


*Figure 1. The Programming Strategy of the Unleashing Resources Initiative*
connect emerging leaders in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism). In the
design phase, the effort in complying with the philosophy culminated with its de-
development of a logic model for the initiative (see Figure 2), which stipulates a
logical relationship from the identification of issues to the development of inter-
vening strategies to address the issues, to the expectation that outcomes will re-
result from the strategies, and to the expected impacts associated with the outcomes
(Yang et al., 2004). This logic model converted the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s
intention into ‘operational’ parameters, and conveyed the information in the pro-
gramming strategy to URI implementers or grantees. It was also an initial guide-
line for conducting the initiative evaluation.3

In the implementation phase, maintaining and promoting fidelity was a
focus of all program directors, grantee organizations, and evaluators. At the
W. K. Kellogg Foundation level, this was done through an informative request
for proposal (RFP) process and a structured funding documentation, followed
by helping grantees align their work, and building grantee capacity to ensure and
promote fidelity.

Informative RFP The intention of the initiative was clearly laid out in the RFP
so that any prospective grantee would know its obligations if its application for
funding was approved.

Structured funding documentation When a grant application was reviewed, in-
formation was converted into a structured document, which showed whether and
how the application was related to the objectives of the initiative. Only applica-
tions closely tied to the fundamental philosophy of the initiative were funded.

Helping grantee alignment URI grantees worked in various fields, targeting dif-
ferent populations, and using different methods. To maximize the fidelity of their
work to the initiative, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation provided a general frame-
work for grantees to check whether they were on track. This framework was often
used by grantees in their annual progress reports to summarize what they had
done over the past year in accomplishing their initiative-related goals. In addition,
the W. K. Kellogg Foundation regularly convened network meetings among URI
grantees. One of the primary purposes of these meetings was to ensure conform-
ity of grantee work to the objectives of the initiative.

Building grantee capacity Realizing that program fidelity can only be achieved
with sufficient support from funders, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation went to great
lengths to help grantees build organizational capacity. In fact, one of the major
funding areas of the initiative targeted capacity building, which allowed many
previously underengaged or underfunded organizations to gain strength gradu-
ally and become more effective in pursuit of their URI-related missions.

At the grantee and evaluator levels, maintaining and promoting fidelity was
achieved through regular communications with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation,
through convening among fellow grantees, through evaluation alignment between
evaluators across clusters and across evaluation levels (Yang et al., 2004), and through assessing the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s funding priorities and trends.

Regular and frequent communications Grantees and evaluators were required to present progress reports annually, communicating with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation about their achievements in terms of meeting their initiative-related goals. Some evaluators regularly attended the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s initiative-related meetings, keeping abreast of the latest development in the initiative.

Grantee network meeting Regular meetings among fellow grantees helped them better understand their roles within the initiative, learn from each other, and increase cooperation and collaboration in achieving their initiative-related goals.

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**Figure 2.** The Logic Model for Unleashing Resources Initiative
Evaluation alignment  The URI is a multilevel intervention program. Evaluation of the initiative was conducted at the grantee (project) level, the cluster level, and the initiative level. To promote fidelity, evaluation work at different levels was aligned so that evaluation was focused on outcomes appropriate for a grantee, a cluster, or the entire initiative.

Kellogg Foundation’s funding activity and trend assessment  One indicator of high program fidelity is that the funder or program sponsor allocates eligible resources according to programming priorities. To keep the W. K. Kellogg Foundation informed about whether it achieved what we called ‘funding resources fidelity’, evaluators assessed the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s funding activities over the years and across planned funding areas.

Permitting Adaptation  Permitting flexibility or adaptation in implementation is both necessary and important when a non-evidence-based program such as the URI is still in an early stage and programming goals are evolving. Although the URI asked grantees to be aware of its ultimate goals and intended outcomes/impacts, it by no means forced them to follow a rigid implementation method, as reflected in its programming strategy. Instead, local context dictated what method a grantee might use. This approach, which may be termed ‘flexibility permitted’, was carried out through convening conferences to seek internal and external comments on the initiative, revising funding priorities based on evidence from the field, encouraging changes and innovations in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism, and acknowledging grantee individualities in evaluation.

Convening conferences to seek comments  In an effort to improve the initiative design and implementation, the URI convened a set of conferences/meetings, involving both internal grantees and external experts and professionals. These events sought inputs from those working in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism into the initiative, which was then refined or adjusted accordingly.

Revising funding priorities  By definition, a non-evidence-based program has no historical evidence to rely on when designing program strategies. Information garnered in the process of implementation is therefore particularly important for program improvement. Over the years, the URI has made changes to its funding priorities based on preliminary findings from various grantees. When the initiative entered its implementation phase, for example, its funding priorities were organizations focusing on developing tools for the nonprofit sector. As the initiative fully unfolded and evidence accumulated, the funding priorities began to shift to organizations supporting and connecting women, youth, and communities of color in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism.

Encouraging changes and innovations  One of the URI funding areas was to promote innovative giving, especially by and/or for the three primary groups. Because innovation itself was the goal, URI grantees in this area had to take innovative
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approaches when implementing their projects. In this context, flexibility or adaptation was imperative.

**Acknowledging grantee individualities in evaluation**  Evaluation at the grantee level examined grantee performance within the ‘local context’ of grantees. At the cluster level, evaluation respected different needs of different grantees within the cluster. At the initiative level, evaluators paid attention to the implications of different approaches used by different grantees for fine tuning the future operation of the entire initiative.

**Fidelity–Adaptation Dynamics and Roles of Evaluation**

The URI experience in program design and implementation pointed to an interesting fidelity–adaptation dynamic: fidelity and adaptation were not only balanced but also worked together to achieve the fundamental objectives of the intervention (Figure 3). In other words, in the URI fidelity and adaptation did not compete against but rather complemented each other. This was the case partly because the URI was developed primarily on the basis of moral values. No prior evidence could be relied on to define fidelity. Also, balance was achieved because the URI programming strategy had ‘adaptation’ built in. As long as implementation adhered to the fundamental objectives of the initiative, adaptation or adjustment dictated by local context would not be counted as a violation of fidelity.

The complementarity between fidelity and adaptation in the URI can best be seen in the fact that many of the URI activities had dual roles. Grantee networking meetings or conferences, for example, served not only as a vehicle for grantees to acquaint themselves with the initiative but also as an important way to provide feedback to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation regarding the suitability of the initiative in different local settings. Similarly, the framework used by grantees to report to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation their progress in the past year not only helped

![Figure 3. Fidelity–Adaptation Dynamics in the URI and Roles of Evaluation](image-url)

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grantees check whether they were doing the ‘right work’ but also allowed them to detail implementation variations.

It is important to note that the URI’s approach to fidelity and adaptation led to expanded roles of evaluation. Conventionally, program evaluation often takes program designs for granted, contrasting observed outcomes against expected outcomes in assessing program effectiveness. An effective program often has observed outcomes that closely match the expected. When observed outcomes do not match expected outcomes well, the implementation of the program is often pronounced as ineffective and the plausible causes are often cited as failures to maintain program fidelity, to make necessary adjustment, or to balance fidelity and adaptation.

In the URI, however, the design of the intervention was evolving. A close match between expected and observed outcomes was not only indicative of program effectiveness but also supportive of the existing program design. Conversely, discrepancies between expected and observed outcomes do not necessarily imply that the program was not effective. Rather, they might offer some hints about how the program design could be modified.

The following example illustrates the point. One of the premises of the URI was the need to engage women, youth, and communities of color in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism. But was this need really justified? Would women, youth, and communities of color truly be effective forces in the field? To answer these questions, URI evaluators examined the amount of resources unleashed by grantees with different employee compositions in gender, age, and race. After controlling for other organizational factors, they found that the grantee’s employee gender or age composition had no effect on the amount of resources unleashed. The higher the proportion of employees in a grantee organization who were communities of color, however, the less resources unleashed by the grantee (WS & Associates, 2005, 2007). Instead of interpreting this later result as evidence against projects focusing on engaging in communities of color, the evaluators and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation deduced from it a greater need to help communities of color improve their work in the field of philanthropy and volunteerism. As a result, programming activities focusing on communities of color were strengthened rather than weakened. In fact, partly as a reaction to these evaluation results, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation formed in 2005 an additional cluster within the initiative: ‘Cultures of Giving: Innovation and Impact Across Communities’. Projects in this cluster would aim ‘to better understand the gap in access to leadership, wealth, and influence by and among communities of color in order to grow their contributions of time, money, and know-how toward mutually responsible and just social change’ (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2005).

Discussion

As a non-evidence-based intervention in the nonprofit sector, the Unleashing Resources Initiative (URI) has been a success story. According to WS & Associates (2005, 2007), with the design and implementation of the initiative over the past
seven years, leaders of the three primary groups have been nurtured, promoted, connected, recognized, and celebrated; some informal systems of giving have been formalized whereas existing formal systems of giving have been strengthened; a substantial amount of resources has been unleashed; collaboration and partnership among grantees and between grantees and other nonprofit organizations has been reinforced and has become a critical strategy to create synergy; and the URI has contributed significantly to influencing mainstream giving. One important reason for these achievements has been the initiative’s balanced approach to the fidelity–adaptation relationship, treating program fidelity and adaptation as complementary rather than competing forces in the entire process.

The fidelity–adaptation complementarity in the URI was necessary because the initiative had almost no precedence or scientific foundation to rely on in either its design or implementation phase. What was certain was only a fundamental philosophy or intention for the initiative that was derived from the core values of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. As such, the program design had to be adaptive in nature and subject to modifications dictated from the field of implementation. Aware of this situation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation built adaptation into the implementation as an integral component when developing the programming strategy for the initiative. This strategy not only made adaptation in implementation legitimate but also set the stage for utilizing adaptation for future program modification.

The URI experience leads to several important lessons for designing and implementing a non-evidence-based intervention. First, unlike an evidence-based program in which goals are generally given and fidelity criteria are generally fixed, program fidelity and adaptation can work together in a non-evidence-based program. High fidelity does not necessarily imply that program implementers cannot adjust the program to different times, populations, and localities. Moreover, keeping an open mind to adaptation helps refine and improve program design.

Second, to make program fidelity and adaptation work together to achieve the fundamental goals of a program, one important approach to program design is to treat it as an evolving or adaptive process, having adaptation as a built-in component in the programming strategy. To a great extent, this approach is similar to what Castro et al. (2004) argued for in developing hybrid programs. As evidenced in their research, when adaptation is built in program designs, fidelity of implementation and program effectiveness can both be enhanced.

Third, treating program design as an adaptive process requires a different relationship between program designers and implementers. In traditional program interventions, program design and implementation are often two isolated steps. Designers design, and implementers implement. Interactions between the two – if any – are generally limited. In non-evidence-based interventions, however, close communication between program designers and implementers are very important. Through communication, implementers learn what the interventions are really about, while designers learn whether the programs designed are relevant to and effective in the real world.

Treating program design as an adaptive process also has two important implications for program evaluation. First, because program design is not a fixed entity, it opens the door to expanding the scope of evaluation. Evaluators should not just
restrict their attention to program implementation process; program design may also become an evaluand.

Second, treating program design as an adaptive process leads to more careful interpretation of evaluation results. When program design is evolving, so are expected outcomes. Consequently, program effectiveness cannot be measured simply by comparing observed with expected outcomes. Although a close match between observed and expected outcomes may validate a program design, a poor match does not necessarily imply that implementation is at fault. Rather, it may be an indication that the program design needs revision or modification.

In summary, based on our experience in helping design, implement, and evaluate a non-evidence-based program, we explore a non-conventional fidelity and adaptation relationship and its implications for program evaluation. We find that in non-evidence-based interventions, program fidelity and adaptation may not be competitors, but serve to complement each other. This non-conventional relationship leads to expanded roles of evaluation in program design and implementation.

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Notes

1. These primary groups are often also called ‘nontraditional individuals’ as in Figure 2.
2. The Unleashing Resources Initiative was previously named Unleashing Resources for Common Good Initiative.
3. It is worth noting that the logic model did contain some ‘evidence’, as indicated in the column titled ‘Issues and Opportunities’. However, this evidence was preliminary in nature, culled in the design phase from the field of philanthropy and volunteerism by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. How and whether one could utilize this evidence to motivate, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive program such as the URI was unclear. In other words, whether one could use the evidence to develop the fidelity criteria for the program was uncertain.

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