MEMO

To: Francisco Rios, Dean, Woodring College of Education
From: Bruce E. Larson
Date: December 14, 2012
Subject: Final Report: Collective Impact Partnership Retreat Funding

**Brief Summary of Proposal:**
Approximately 20 Western Washington University and community people have held meetings focused on the shared goal of “High achievement equity among schools in the Bellingham District and measurable improvement in teacher preparation served by a seamless clinical partnership.” These meetings led to an innovative partnership model based on the concept that collective efforts will make a greater impact on student performance than single program initiatives can and that University students develop professional skills more effectively when course content is genuinely combined with applied practice. The project is designed to redress unequal opportunities through the strategic use of resources and teaching/learning strategies that are known to be effective.

**Summary of Results:**
On October 19-20, 2012 thirty-six participants met at the North Cascades Institute for a “Collective Impact Retreat.” Fifteen were from WWU, thirteen were employees of Bellingham Schools, and eight we involved in different community organizations. The stated goal of the retreat was as follows: Explore the problem of educational inequality and related issues in K-12 and Teacher Education that require deliberate and purposeful action in pursuit of a “collective impact.” In addition, the following objectives were identified:

- Explore the “collective impact” model for responding to pressing social challenges
- Understand the “problem” of educational inequality in K-12 schools as they operate in a specific school district: Bellingham School District (BSD)
- Understand the “problem” of preparing teacher education candidates to be skilled and committed to addressing educational inequalities in a specific educator preparation program: Woodring College of Education (WCE)
- Understand the “problem” of child, family, and community equity that might also be contributing factors
- Appreciate and extend the principles and values related to a commitment to collaborative engagement between BSD, WCE and community partners
- Uncover all the facets of the most central issues related to the problems as described
- Develop a portfolio of actions that would address those central issues
- Prioritize the most central issues and the most promising practices to address them
- Construct a plan of action, including feedback loop and evaluation mechanism, for our collective impact
- Appreciate the work (and workers) engaged in and committed to addressing social inequalities
- Develop new and deeper relationships among team members

The vision for this gathering was compelling, because it recognized that students have unequal opportunities to learn even before they enter school and that the differences in their knowledge and skills grow ever greater the longer students remain in school. The retreat created a space to brainstorm how collaboration amongst schools, university, and community partners provide professional learning opportunities for all, as well as create achievement equity for students.

The agenda allowed for an initial exploration of the article “Collective Impact,” followed by presentations from Woodring, Bellingham Schools, and Whatcom County health officials on respective visions, goals, assets and challenges related to educational inequality, and pockets of hope. The intention was to front load the retreat with some data points regarding issues of access and equity in our community. This then led to group work and individual thinking about how these partnerships could allow for a collective and positive impact on Bellingham and the surrounding communities.

The results revealed strong commitment from the participants to continue on with school-university-community partnerships. Unity among participants was enhanced when details about current roles and future ideas emerged during the retreat. Strong agreement and interest in continuing collaborative relationships amongst those attending was expressed, with almost everyone stating that they wanted to continue being involved in this work. From the retreat, several important themes and “areas of focus” emerged. These were distilled down using a value voting strategy (where participants prioritized the areas). The top three areas of emphasis that emerged focused on:

1. Early Childhood;
2. Family Engagement (bringing families to the table to better understand needs/supports);
3. Healthy active lives.

The retreat also identified an area in north Bellingham to initially focus the efforts of the public schools, university students and programs, and community projects. This is a high needs area that would likely benefit from a collective approach to addressing the three areas of emphasis. At this point, the challenge is to take the retreat suggestions and put them into action. While the retreat provided a positive space for thinking deeply about these issues, and even identifying a location to pilot/test a collective impact, participants ran out of time to provide a strong plan of action. Similarly, there was little discussion about funding for these types of initiatives. Conversations that did occur were informal, but did include applying for grants supporting math and science curriculum, early childhood support programs, teacher and principal assessments, and the elimination of the opportunity-gap in schools. This needs to be revisited. Nonetheless, the retreat met the goals of the innovation proposal. Collaboration amongst Bellingham Schools, Woodring, and community partners will continue, and the targeted efforts in north Bellingham will take shape in the not-too-distant future. This was an exciting retreat that rallied together people from the community in an effort to reduce inequities, increase access to services, and benefit children in Whatcom County.

Note: Agenda and data sets are available but not included in this two-page summary.