1 Introduction

While it can be said that working together is a strategy long adopted by communities to address collective needs (Blackmar, Getha-Taylor, Moen, & Pierce, 2018; O'Toole, 2014), it is also true that the imperative for collaboration gained traction in public and nonprofit management scholarship and practice in recent years. For example, Milward and Provan (2000) highlighted the considerable impact of contracting out on human services delivery. The authors' focus on the growing "hollow state" signaled a significant change in the public problem-solving approach. Similarly, Kettl (2002) argued that society's contemporary boundary-spanning issues did not fit the command-and-control assumptions of the bureaucratic structures that characterized traditional government responses. Collaboration and coordination, rather than authority and hierarchy, would be necessary to address twenty-first-century dilemmas.

These observations have proven accurate. Bungled cross-sector responses to disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, for example, sharply illustrated the essential nature of effective collaboration (Hicklin, O'Toole, Meier, & Robinson, 2009). Disasters are not the only context where boundary-spanning work is needed, of course. Whenever there are community issues that occur frequently, have lasting duration, affect many people, are disruptive to personal or community life, and are perceived as problems, the solutions will often require the input and resources of many partners (Community Tool Box, 2018). Examples of such issues include: homelessness eradication, pollution reduction, domestic violence reduction, ensuring humane treatment of animals, improved health outcomes, neighborhood revitalization, community education, youth development, and gang prevention.

These and other contemporary governance concerns indicate that the focus on collaboration is not a passing fad. Instead, the imperative to work together seems to grow stronger each year. For example, in response to the city's changing demographics, Aurora, Colorado, saw a need to institutionalize collaboration four years ago to effectively meet the needs of incoming immigrants and refugees (ICMA, 2019). Also, two years ago, Philadelphia institutionalized a collaborative approach to "smart city" design to "understand and implement smart and emerging technology solutions that would improve City service delivery for its broad community of residents, businesses, and visitors" (City of Philadelphia, 2019, p. 2). Further, collaboration has recently been identified the critical mechanism for addressing such entrenched and complex issues as the distrust that can exist between police and the communities they serve (Hillard Heintze, 2018). Finally, groups such as the Water Research

Foundation advocate for much broader and deeper collaboration in the future to ensure effective stewardship of our limited natural resources (Stoker, Pivo, & Howe et al., 2018).

Communities across the United States share these and other boundary-spanning public concerns. The forces driving the need for collaboration, including changing public service demands, resource limitations, ongoing privatization, and "wicked problems," span jurisdictions (Koliba, Meek, Zia, & Mills, 2018). As practitioners grapple with the increased need for effective collaboration, scholars also wrestle with this topic. Over the years, scholars developed a stream of competing definitions to represent its many facets (O'Leary & Viz, 2012). For the purposes of this project, Bryson, Crosby, and Stone's (2006) definition of collaboration is adopted: it is the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities to achieve an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations working separately.

While there is no shortage of definitions or studies on collaboration, this project is unique in its response to several gaps in the literature. First*, our collective understanding of collaboration lacks long-term focus.* In their review of cross-sector collaboration studies, Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2015) noted the proliferation of single-case studies to the exclusion of longitudinal ones. The latter, they say, can offer a richer understanding of the complexities of collaboration and thus are needed. Similarly, in their comprehensive review of what is known about nonprofit collaboration to date, Gazley and Guo (2017) noted an imbalance in research, especially regarding our understanding of how collaborations evolve over time. To address the long-term problems mentioned, committed and lasting collaboration is needed. Understanding the elements that contribute to such resiliency and success over time is essential.

Related to this point, a second gap emerges: *the elements that are expected to lead to collaborative success are largely untested*. Some of the most prominent theories that serve to explain successful community-level collaboration, including theories of collaborative advantage (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), network life cycle (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998), and adaptive capacity (Strichman, Bickel, & Marshood, 2008), are practically grounded, but the broader generalizability of these contributions is not well established. For this reason, this study applies these theories to a diverse sample of *community collaboratives*. According to Nowell (2009), community collaboratives are connected via voluntary ties rather than contractual arrangements. Their members work through informal relationships that make use of each member's expertise and resources. In addition, members of community collaboratives exercise some degree of autonomy when working together. These specific characteristics – voluntary ties, informal relationships, and member autonomy – provide an opportunity to examine what keeps community collaborations strong over time.

Third, *the multilevel elements of collaboration are not consistently captured in the literature*. While a multitude of studies have effectively examined collaboration at the organizational and interorganizational levels, other elements have received comparatively less attention. For example, one of the weaknesses in conceptualizations of collaborative governance is the failure to focus on individual actors (Kapacu, Hu, & Khosa, 2017; Torfing, 2016). Keast and Mandell's 2014 study illustrates an exception. In their review of Australian cross-sector collaborations, these authors identified three essential elements: 1) governance, management, and leadership; 2) collaborative systems/processes; and 3) individual competencies. However, even this comprehensive study did not consider some of the broader, external, and systemic features that impact internal collaborative dynamics (see Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). This study builds upon these foundations and considers systemic, collaborative, and individual levels of community collaborations, which together contribute to their success or failure over time.

Fourth*, studies of cross-sector collaboration are not consistently balanced in their treatment of the diverse partners involved*. Even some of the most inclusive treatments of horizontal, or community-level, collaboration focus primarily on building capacity in government organizations (see Agranoff & McGuire, 2004; Forrer, Kee, & Boyer, 2014). This study offers an opportunity to consider the perspectives of other essential community partners who are necessarily involved in addressing vexing societal priorities. Namely, this study focuses on partnerships that include nonprofit collaborators that are often neglected in empirical studies (Cornforth, Hayes, & Vangen, 2015; Mitchell, O'Leary, & Gerard, 2015).

This project addresses these gaps by examining nineteen voluntary collaborations that each worked (or continue to work) on long-term, and generally intractable, community issues. The study sample is taken from the Foundation Center's Collaboration Hub database. Created in 2009, the database features descriptions of notable partnerships. The entries were solicited and reviewed for the Center's collaboration prize. The Center issued another call for submissions in 2011. These publicly available records now provide a snapshot of collaborations in time and also an opportunity to consider how those efforts have fared since then. This is accomplished via interviews with representatives of the collaborations in the sample and the use of critical juncture methodology. This methodological approach examines pivotal moments in time and the strategies used in those moments that determine future trajectories (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007).

By comparing and contrasting accounts from collaboratives that have endured with those that have ended, this project seeks to identify the features

that contribute to *collaborative resilience.* Resilience has been defined as "the ability of systems to cope with shocks and bounce back" (Black & Hughes, 2001, p. 16). It can apply to individuals, groups, organizations, and systems that respond productively to significant disruptive change (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). Resilience is of particular interest given the community issues that the collaborations in this sample are working to address. While it might be expected that partnerships will end once their purpose is achieved, this study focuses on collaborations that exist to address long-term community issues that are not easily or quickly solved. As discussed by Quick and Feldman (2014, p. 674), while the concept of resilience has often been applied to organizations recovering from "acute crises," collaborative resilience allows systems and partners to continue to work together on shared goals over time despite disruptions. This study seeks to explore and elaborate the features that define this concept.

This study is unique in its long-term perspective, its use of critical juncture methodology to empirically examine factors for success, its multilevel focus including the systemic, collaborative, and individual features of resilience, and its consideration of diverse partners involved in community collaborations. Given these contributions, it is expected that findings from this study will offer value for collaboration scholars and students as well as for practitioners engaged in the challenging and important work of community partnerships.

2 Theoretical Foundations

Three theoretical lenses apply to this study. First, the theory of *collaborative advantage* grounds the effort's methodological approach and serves as the foundation for its core research question: *what differentiates partnerships that last over time?* Second, *life cycle* theory is used to explain the study's underlying evolutionary premise: that is, collaboratives can grow, change, adapt, and/or die. The study's third theoretical foundation, *adaptive capacity*, frames the study's goal of exploring and explaining collaborative resilience over time. Each theoretical lens is presented in the following sections.

2.1 Collaborative Advantage

Huxham and Vangen's (2005) theory indicates that, to gain advantage from collaboration, something has to be achieved collectively that could not have been achieved by any one of the organizations acting alone. This theory is aligned with Bryson, Crosby, and Stone's (2006) definition of collaboration that guides this research. Huxham and Vangen's collaborative advantage theory also captures the idea of *collaborative inertia*, or the phenomenon that occurs when some collaborations make slow progress and others die without achieving

anything. This concept is of special interest to this study. Specifically, it is a goal of this work to answer the question: *what differentiates collaborative outcomes over time?*

In addition to utilizing this theory as a guide for the core research question, the present study also utilizes a sampling approach that is similar to Huxham and Vangen's. These scholars sought to examine collaboration generally and across such divergent topical areas as childcare, transportation, environmental issues, health care, education, and economic development in order to offer broadly applicable recommendations. Their underlying premise is that research for social practice should be concerned with the study of general laws as well as the diagnosis of specific situations to connect theory and practice. Huxham and Vangen's approach serves as a guide for this study's design.

Finally, Huxham and Vangen worked to build theory inductively, from naturally occurring data (such as narratives and observations). This study adopts a similar methodological approach in order to apply the theory of collaborative advantage to a sample of long-lasting community collaboratives. The goal of applying this theoretical lens to this sample is to better understand what differentiates partnerships that illustrate collaborative advantage from those that experience collaborative inertia.

2.2 Life Cycle

Organizational life cycle research spans decades (Bonn & Pettigrew, 2009; Downs, 1967; Greiner, 1972; Mintzberg, 1984; Quinn & Cameron, 1983) and provides a framework for understanding how organizations grow and change over time. The life cycle concept captures the transition from organizational birth to maturity to revitalization to decline and death. For this study, life cycle theory captures the underlying theoretical argument: partnerships can grow and change, and adapt or die, over time. Identifying and understanding life cycle stages matters in terms of setting priorities and identifying appropriate management strategies for sustainability. Underpinning the life cycle theory is an evolutionary perspective in which organizations are expected to pass through stages of development (Lester, Parnell, & Carraher, 2003). Overall, growth and development should result in more opportunities and better outcomes.

It is expected that life cycle stages are sequential: the stages can be observed and may be propelled by a sense of crisis (Daft, 2012). Identifying and understanding life cycle stages can provide managers with a "road map" that may help them address issues in a predictable way (Hanks, 1990). Life cycle models typically include three to ten stages and describe a similar pattern of development. The majority of models include variations of a five-stage model. Quinn and

Cameron (1983) detailed the major approaches to categorizing life cycle stages. Despite varied terminology and models, there is a similar structuring of stages across the literature: 1) viability; 2) growth; 3) maturity; 4) revitalization; 5) decline. Each stage presents its own characteristics and problems to solve. Key to identifying and resolving problems at each stage is recognizing changing needs and also adopting adaptive management behaviors (Dodge & Robbins, 1992).

According to Bess (1998), it is assumed that these life cycle stages apply similarly across sectors, although there are few empirical studies to offer confirmation. In 2001, Stevens presented a life cycle model designed specifically for nonprofit organizations. Stevens' model featured seven stages: 1) idea; 2) start-up; 3) growth; 4) maturity; 5) decline; 6) turnaround; 7) terminal. In their study of twelve pioneering human service organizations in California's Bay Area, Kimberlin, Schwartz, and Austin (2011) built upon this work and identified life cycle stages as essential to explaining the long-term viability of nonprofit organizations in their sample. Thus, life cycle theory offers a valuable and appropriate lens to apply to this study.

The life cycle perspective is deeply rooted in the foundations of the natural and social sciences, including biology (O'Rand & Krecker, 1990). The organism metaphor is particularly salient in turbulent environments where flexible approaches are needed for survival (Morgan, 1986). Public and private management scholars have applied this concept to organizational settings to understand "life stages" in a generalized way and provide recommendations for renewal that prevent decline or death. It can be surmised that, just as we have thought about organizations as changing organisms, this lens may also help us understand the ways in which networks can grow and change over time to remain viable (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998).

2.3 Collaborative Resilience and Adaptive Capacity

Resilience has been defined as the "developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, and even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility" (Luthans, 2002, p. 702). Witmer and Mellinger (2016) define organizational resilience as the "ability to adapt to internal/external disturbances, maintain integrity as a system, reorganize itself, and increase capacity by transforming challenges into opportunities for learning and innovation" (pp. 256–257). This study seeks to understand: 1) what are the negative and positive events that require collaborative resilience; and 2) which factors distinguish resilient collaborations over time?

To address these questions, two conceptual frameworks serve as guides. First, Strichman, Bickel, and Marshood's (2008) study of a sample of nonprofit

organizations in Israel identified five elements expected to contribute to adaptive capacity: shared vision, inquisitiveness/openness, evaluative thinking/systems thinking, social capital, and external focus/network connectedness (see Table 1). Second, the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center's extensive literature review identified seven elements that are expected to contribute to collaborative sustainability over time: leadership, membership diversity, history of collaboration, structure, resource diversity, sustainability plan, and community buy-in (NORC, 2011, pp. 31–34). This study seeks to examine whether these elements help explain the long-term viability of a sample of community collaborations from across the United States.

Table 1 Predictors of adaptive capacity and sustainability

Adaptive Capacity Elements	
Concept	**Description**
Shared Vision	Creating shared understanding, collectively building a shared purpose. Members involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision. Collaborative vision integrated with personal vision. Understanding how job tasks fulfill collaborative goals.
Inquisitiveness/ Openness	Embracing dissention and diversity of perspectives. Willingness to question underlying assumptions and accepted wisdom.
Evaluative Thinking/ Systems Thinking	Understanding interdependence of different parts of collaborative. Recognizing patterns of change/ addressing underlying causes of events/ acknowledging the nature of unpredictability. An "appetite for inquiry": seeking out data and information to learn and then apply and share the knowledge. Data collection, learning, and knowledge development are an essential, collaborative-wide effort. Evaluative activities are considered as a tool for learning and improving performance.
Social Capital	Creating an environment of trust among members. Ensuring that collaborative policies nurture trust. Encouraging of group dialogue, communication, and collective reflection. Signaling the importance

Table 1 (cont.)

Adaptive Capacity Elements	
Concept	**Description**
	of knowledge sharing and importance of reciprocity. Rewarding collaborative success, not just the individual. Expectation of members to work together. Creating opportunities for interaction (both time and space). Supporting the creation of social networks.
External Focus/ Network Connectedness	Awareness of interdependence with surrounding environment. "Sufficiently porous" to information and ideas and locates resources and capabilities from outside of the collaborative. Understanding potential to create systematic change through strategic alliances and joint efforts. Construction of partnerships or alliances with others. Understanding the needs of collaborative stakeholders.
Predictors of Collaborative Sustainability	
Leadership	Focused and effective leadership; leadership continuity
Membership Diversity	Engaged stakeholders from the community; a variety of sector partners are involved
History of Collaboration	Prior experience working together collaboratively
Structure	Clear operational guidelines; program management policies and procedures; active governing body
Resource Diversity	Political, financial, institutional resources including money, people, goods, and services
Sustainability Plans	Goals and objectives; sustainability strategies; planning and evaluation
Community Buy-In	Community interest and respect for the effort

Source: adapted from Strichman, Bickel, and Marshood, 2008, p. 226; NORC, 2011

3 The Study

The study sample comes from the Foundation Center's Collaboration Hub (formerly the Nonprofit Collaboration Database). The Collaboration Hub is an online repository of collaborations that were considered for the Center's 2009 and 2011 Collaboration Prizes. While the database was initiated to collect

nominations for the prize competition, it continues to collect information beyond the prize time frame. To date, it has information on over 600 partnerships from across the United States. The collection represents a valuable source of historical information, as many of the collaborations detailed there have been in existence for years and in some cases decades.

To study elements that help to explain collaborative resilience over time, the sampling frame was limited to voluntary alliances rather than contracted partnerships or mergers. The Collaboration Hub defines alliances as those collaborative arrangements in which "members maintain structural autonomy but have defined roles and responsibilities to achieve specific social goals or purposes." Further, given the study's goals, partnerships including three or more organizations with a history of ten years or more were of special interest for oversampling. In addition, the sampling strategy included the goal of balancing examples of enduring partnerships with those that had ended to provide an opportunity for comparison and contrast.

A sample of sixty-one collaborations was drawn from the Collaboration Hub. Email invitations for phone interviews were sent to the listed contacts from the database, and online searches were conducted in cases of defunct/returned emails. Due to turnover, retirements, dissolution of partnerships, and lack of availability to participate, the final sample consists of nineteen collaborations (31 percent response rate). Of these collaborations, ten remained intact and nine had ended as of the time of the interviews. While seventeen of the nineteen collaborations included three or more partners, it is important to note that two of the examples had just two partners (see Table 2). These were retained in the sample because both Independent Dialysis at Lion's Center and YMCA of Greater Des Moines/Mercy Foundation offered examples of notable partnerships that were no longer active. Also, in both instances, multiple representatives were willing to participate in this study and thus offer a broader view of the collaborative experience.

A total of thirty-five representatives from the nineteen collaborations, including twenty women and fifteen men, were interviewed. One additional interview was conducted with a recommended collaborator, but that individual was not involved with the collaborations in this study. As a result, this thirty-sixth interview is excluded from the analysis. The phone interviews averaged forty-five minutes each. The data collection took place in Fall 2017 and Spring 2018. Most interviewees represent the nonprofit sector (n=30) while the remainder represent government organizations (n=5).

The study sample is geographically diverse: the nineteen collaborations in this study are located in fourteen states. The collaboratives are distributed across the four recognized U.S. Census Bureau Regions: West (including

Table 2 Study sample

Collaboration (*Ended)	Location	Year Established	Number of Partner Organizations
Austin ASPCA Partnership*	TX	2007	5–7
Californians for Pesticide Reform	CA	1997	>10
Care Access for New Americans	MO	2004	8–10
Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Violence	PA	2003	>10
Health Law Partnership	GA	2004	3–4
Independent Dialysis at Lion's Center*	MD	1997	2
Make Medicare Work Coalition	IL	2005	3–4
Mapping Our Voices for Equality*	WA	2010	5–7
Midlands Mentoring Partnership	NE	1999	>10
Nystrom United Revitalization Effort	CA	2002	>10
Pearce Campus Community Resource Center*	IL	2005	>10
Pittsburgh Climate Initiative	PA	2008	5–7
River Region Health Information Organization*	AL	2008	>10
The Homeless Youth System*	OR	1998	5–7
Violence Prevention Coalition	CA	1991	>10
WASH Monitoring Exchange*	VA	2011	5–7
WeGo Together for Kids	IL	2005	>10
Wyoming Community Youth Coalition*	MI	2007	>10
YMCA of Greater Des Moines/ Mercy Foundation*	IA	2008	2

Source: The Foundation Center's Collaboration Hub

California, Oregon, and Washington); Midwest (including Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, and Nebraska); South (including Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Texas, and Virginia); and Northeast (Pennsylvania). The aims of