

Operationalizing Complex Collaboration

Practical Tool



Part of the Complex Collaboration Toolkit.

Introduction

About the Tools and Toolkits

These tools and toolkits are hosted by **Healthy Campus Alberta**, a provincial community of practice committed to cultivating caring campus communities in Alberta. Originally developed by **Alberta Campus Mental Health Innovation** (an initiative carried out by the **Alberta Students Executive Council**), the tools and toolkits are learning-focused, living documents that serve to support our community of practice.

About the Complex Collaboration Toolkit

Complex collaborations are essential to promote mentally healthy campuses across Alberta. Originally developed to support Regional Hubs, collaborative groups that originated amidst the launch of the Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addictions Framework, this toolkit is adaptable to any collaboration: interdepartmental, regional, provincial, national, or international. The toolkit frames complex collaboration as a point of connection among individuals, teams or organizations with complementary skills and resources willing to collaborate on a common objective. However, creating a shared approach for mutual gain is not an easy task. The complex collaboration model has been developed to provide some insights and approaches that weave together a variety of processes and theories to enhance the effectiveness of these complex collaborations.

About Operationalizing Complex Collaboration

The **Operationalizing Complex Collaboration** tool is the second step in the Complex Collaboration Model.

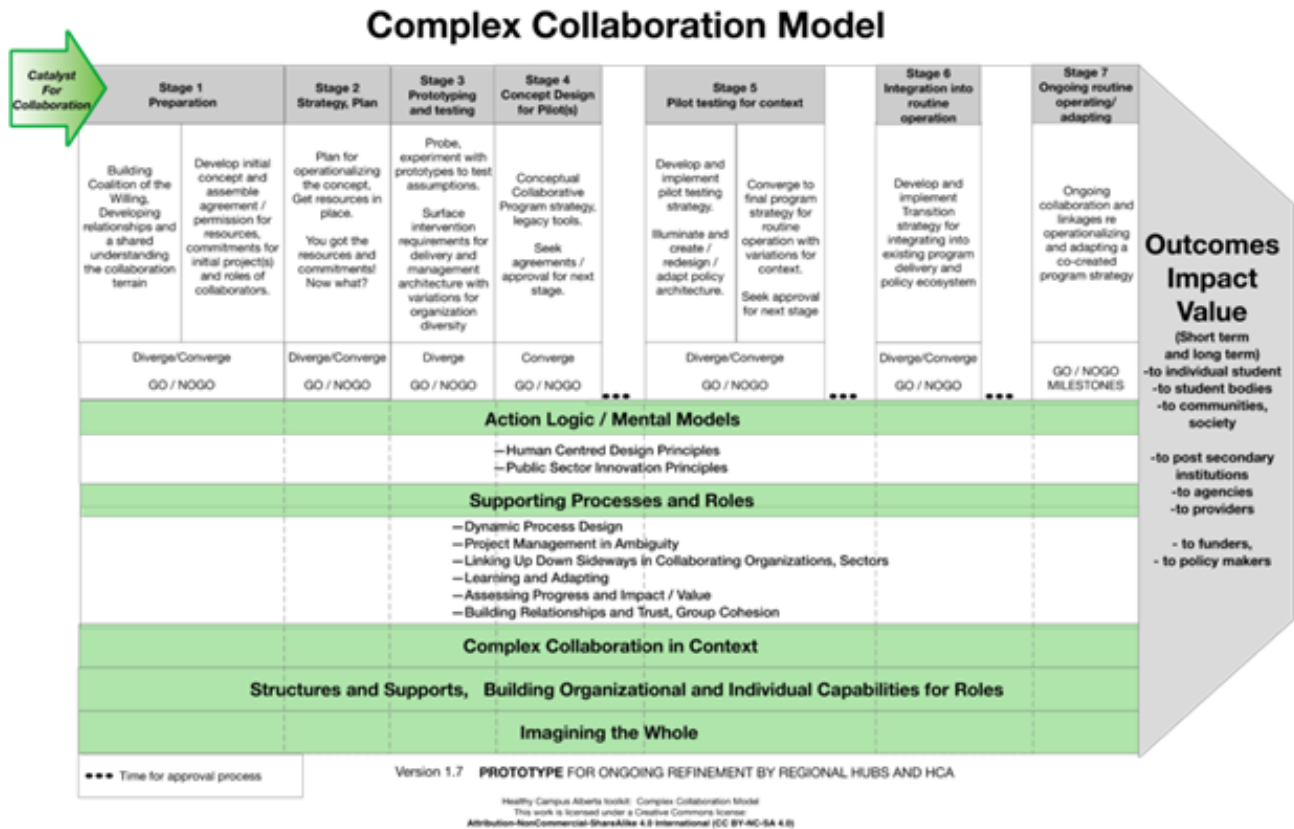
Who could use this tool?

- Coordinators of collaborations among post-secondary institutions;
- Program planners in post-secondary student services or administration;
- Mental health professionals who work with post-secondary students.

What purposes could this tool serve?

- Providing a framework to guide every step of a collaboration;
- Providing support for specific aspects of a collaboration;
- Initiating conversations about complex collaboration among organizations;
- Revisiting ongoing collaborations to make them more effective.

Operationalizing Complex Collaboration



The ways in which a complex collaboration action steps are operationalized are shown as horizontal bars because they must be attended to in every stage. The activities and elements involved in operationalization are:

1. Action Logic
2. Supporting Processes and Roles
3. Navigating Context
4. Building Capabilities
5. Imagining the Whole



Download a high-definition PDF of the Complex Collaboration Model.

Action Logic

Whatever the degree of collaboration, the Complex Collaboration Model is based on a mindset and process of human-centred design and public sector innovation. Recognizing these two mental models as foundational to the choices made about the action steps on the collaboration journey helps to clarify the rationale to participants so they have a sense of what journey they are on, as well as highlighting needs for project management, learning and adaptation and monitoring progress and impact.

Human Centered Design

Human-centered design is well suited to address complex collaboration endeavours. At its core, human-centred design is a learning strategy, one that allows practitioners to engage with complex challenges through an interactive approach of exploration and experimentation and to do so in ways that develops human focused solutions.

Exploration activities allow practitioners to investigate unfamiliar issues by interacting with and observing users, understanding context and looking at what others are doing. Experimentation supports structured activities to try out new ideas, methods and approaches in order to test possible solutions. Designers engage in exploration and experimentation in iterative and cyclical ways.

Given that in complex settings it is impossible to understand all variables, actors, interactions and dependencies in advance of acting, human-centred design allows collaborators to gain a basic understanding of the present state in order to identify ideas that can be tested, refined and launched. Effective design efforts involve collaboration. There are powerful advantages in bringing together many eyes, different resources and capabilities to create effective solutions.

Human Centered Design is...

- user-focused
- holistic
- action-oriented
- collaborative
- optimistic
- complex
- empathetic
- challenging
- creative



The Double Diamond design approach can be helpful for implementing human centered design in complex collaboration.

Action Logic cont.

Public Sector Innovation

Broadly defined, innovation involves a process of purposeful change. These changes range from improved processes, new or refined products or services, to new business models and strategies. Innovation occurs on a continuum from basic improvements to transformational or over the horizon initiatives.

Innovation occurs in any organization – private, public or not-for-profit, in any sector and any jurisdiction. In addition to regular innovation activities – such as, process improvement and new offerings – the public sector often takes responsibility for pursuing over-the-horizon, game changing innovation initiatives. Unlike most innovation projects where results emerge quickly, many public sector innovations may take years (or longer) to contribute to desired outcomes. At the same time, public sector innovation is often patchy, uncertain and slow. Too often, solid ideas are not implemented and woven into operations and service delivery activities.

Innovation is important and challenging in all sectors. There is now a recognition that different types of innovation require different approaches. Techniques that work for quality improvements – incremental changes in existing processes and offerings – are insufficient to support more complex and aspirational initiatives. When considering an innovation in a whole system, such as the types often initiated in a complex collaboration, which involve more actors, interdependencies and continually shifting contexts, a design-based approach is often more appropriate. However, innovating in a system must align key principles of the client- and society-facing aspects in the delivery and management systems as well as the underlying policy architecture. These can be invisible to those focusing only on the service or program.

While the core principles of innovation are universal – consistent across sectors – public sector innovation involves unique processes and challenges. For example, public sector innovation occurs in a politicized setting: the interplay between government and the public sector; new initiatives often require enabling legislation and regulations; often, there is a high sensitivity and cautiousness around real and perceived risks. As well, obtaining adequate resources, navigating the highly formal budget planning and allocation system, finding ways to work on innovation projects (which typically require the flexible use of staff, resources and infrastructure) in systems designed for predictability and consistency also present challenges. The process of prototyping and purposeful pilot testing to assure a new approach will work across multiple settings and diverse populations is at odds with the need to show citizens new action. While these challenges can be overcome, public sector innovation requires that innovators (in our case, collaborative innovators) have the capabilities to navigate this complex environment.

Supporting Processes and Roles

increasing attention to, and sophistication of the methods used to manage project tasks as well as to build relationships and group cohesion, with the underlying development of working trust. The Complex Collaboration Model includes six process and role aspects – each is described briefly so that collaborations can have a sense of which capabilities are important for representatives and for external supports.

Dynamic Process Design

There may emerge a need for a neutral process designer to increase the likelihood that group members will trust their voice will be heard in the group, their interests are equally of concern, and there is the potential for finding solutions that meet both the interests of each party and of the whole regional hub.

The dynamic process designer needs to have a variety of methods to use in helping the group navigate the tasks in each Stage, so as to build relationships and trust at each step of the process. This includes using the additional information gained in each stage of actioning the collaboration to update and refine the various systems maps started in Stage One – Preparation. Onboarding new members, and learning sessions at the end of each stage are also opportunities to reinforce areas of mutual gain, mutual interest and to identify gaps or potential transitions that may have been invisible in previous stages.

Dynamic Process design methods also recognize the difference between group decision making from negotiating individual decision making. Usually group members have significant skills in making decisions –making meaning of assembled information, choosing between alternatives and coming to a position. Sometimes this is important when groups are making decisions, but sometimes it is not, as it prevents a group from exploring and leveraging the entire potential of the collective group members. Helping a group of individuals share their information and perspectives, identify opportunities and develop options for action together, before coming to a conclusion on what actions will best achieve multiple outcomes is a way to maximize effectiveness of collaborations.

In a complex collaboration it is especially important for representatives on the Coordinating Committee to be clear about their relative roles. They have BOTH a role in representing their organization, perhaps their sector, AND a leadership role acting for the whole region.

Supporting Processes and Roles cont.

Managing Projects in Ambiguity

Traditional project management approaches assume a linear progress through stages, with the ability to establish hard and fast boundaries on success at the outset of a project. However, Public sector initiatives especially must consider a range of outcomes beyond the narrow focus of any project – such as public safety, environmental sustainability and impact on a diverse array of citizens. Further, the ambiguity inherent in an innovative project, plus the reality of collaborations in a public sector context means that projects must be planned and implemented in ways that are ‘fit for purpose’ and ‘fit for context’.

Building in pre-established Go/NoGo decision points at each stage along the trajectory of the project (sometimes called a Stage-Gate process) can provide the means for organizations to re-assess the likelihood of achieving desired value with the benefit of more information than was available at the beginning of the project.

Tips for Managing Projects in Ambiguity

- Complete the task (usually through iterative phase development);
- Build group cohesion through developing relationships and working trust among the representatives;
- Deepen understanding of the collaboration’s terrain;
- Reflect individually and together;
- Assess progress and Impact /Value;
- Help representatives to engage and make connections in their organization and constituency, so that decisions made for the Regional Hub will be understood and supported throughout the collaboration;
- Flag any potential issues with an organization’s funder accountability requirements.

Linking

Collaboration involves establishing and leveraging relationships and communication between the different participating organizations. The relationships are useful to ensure that solid two-way communication channels exist. As well, they help to facilitate the flow of resources and ensuring that appropriate decisions are made in a timely fashion.

Often, connections between organizations focus on the specific representatives that sit at the table of a complex collaboration initiative. They serve as the conduit for information sharing. However, the need for interaction and involvement frequently extends well beyond the role of these specific individuals. It is important to attend to linkages in at least two ways – between and within the collaborating organizations.

Supporting Processes and Roles cont.

Learning and Adapting

A learning and adapting process enables collaborating organizations and their representatives to develop more sophisticated capabilities for levels of collaboration with higher degrees of challenge. This includes the belief that mutual gain solutions can be found.



View the [Collaborative Learning Sessions tool](#)

Assessing Progress and Impact

In a public sector or whole of society application, Outcomes, Impact and Value to multiple stakeholders in both the short-term and long-term must be assessed and adaptations made on the basis of a balance among them. One element of assessing progress involves descriptive processes – identifying what has been done over time. Even in a description one can discern the multiple dimensions of change in a complex environment, system or organization. Stories help to animate the concrete elements of a timeline, and this includes stories that illustrate hope and celebration, as well as stories that illustrate concern or despair.



Assessment Resources

Approaches to Evaluation:

- [Developmental Evaluation](#)
- [Principle-focused evaluation](#)
- [Utilization Focused Evaluation](#)
- [Realist Evaluation](#)
- [Theory-based evaluation](#)

Identifying Outcomes:

- [Outcomes Mapping](#)
- [Systemic Maturity Model](#)

Supporting Processes and Roles cont.

Building Cohesion

Deepening group cohesion as the process evolves is critical to achieving real and sustained ability to navigate the challenges of collaborations. As organizations join, or decide to leave, and as representatives at the table change, using celebrations for those leaving, and onboarding for those coming in is an important part of this process. This involves readiness for '2 steps forward 1 step back' process – finding a way to step back so the group can both bring them along to what's been developed, and open to evolving the design to take advantage of some aspect that the new representative or new organization. A mental visual such as knowing that the ocean advances and retreats iteratively as the tide comes in and out can help neutralize the general hope that a straight-line progress is the proper trajectory for progress.

Tips for Building Cohesion

- Engage in the prototyping process;
 - Produce concrete evidence of collective decisions;
 - Build momentum upon the team and project's strengths;
 - Celebrate small wins;
 - Develop awareness of the team's achievement;
- Refer to the double diamond process;
- Refer to the ladder of participation tool;

Navigating Context

Context

The importance of context in a complex collaboration exists at both the individual member level and the overall regional level. The collaboration will need to have ways to engage productively with changes in the collaborating organizations. People in leadership positions may change, organizational priorities and contexts change. Each organization will benefit by having ways to manage these inevitable transitions in ways that support the productivity and effectiveness of the collaboration.

On the overall regional level, The Regional Hubs' collaborations will of course need to adapt in responses to the wider context. The context of our dynamic world is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, so the collaboration can count on needing to be agile in adapting.

Building Capabilities

Structures and Supports

Part of the process of operationalizing a complex collaboration is determining what type of 'glue' is needed to help the group work together make collective decisions, and to be the steward of the collective – a sort of 'virtual organization' that provides the structure and processes to help organizations make decisions along the process.

This 'glue' can take a variety of forms, depending on the complexity of the project and process required. Through the toolkit, this was called 'Secretariat' to allow for choice of the most appropriate structure and function, and whether different functions would be undertaken by different members of the collaborative, or contracted out.

Functions of a Secretariat

- Administrative, logistical, and personnel, finance, information systems;
- Decision support (e.g. gathering and compiling information and opinions from the group to support planning, illuminating the terrain, measurement etc);
- Dynamic Process Design approach to group facilitation, mediation to support the collaborative's sense-making and decision-making.

Building Capabilities for Roles

A critical aspect of a collaborative's 'structures and supports' are the capabilities of all the collaborators, as well as the Secretariat. As well as the capabilities that the organizations and individuals bring to the collaboration, there will be lots of opportunity to use the experience to build additional expertise, or new capabilities, especially in the ability to navigate ambiguity, volatility and uncertainty in a group. Awareness of self and others, non-violent communication and 'bricoleur'/ creative crafting of new ideas will be invaluable skills to have and develop further. Strategies to build capabilities for roles include clarifying the rules of consensus decision making; members believing there will be strategies that enable mutual gain; and growing the level of trust in the group so that individual members are comfortable in raising requirements from their organization.

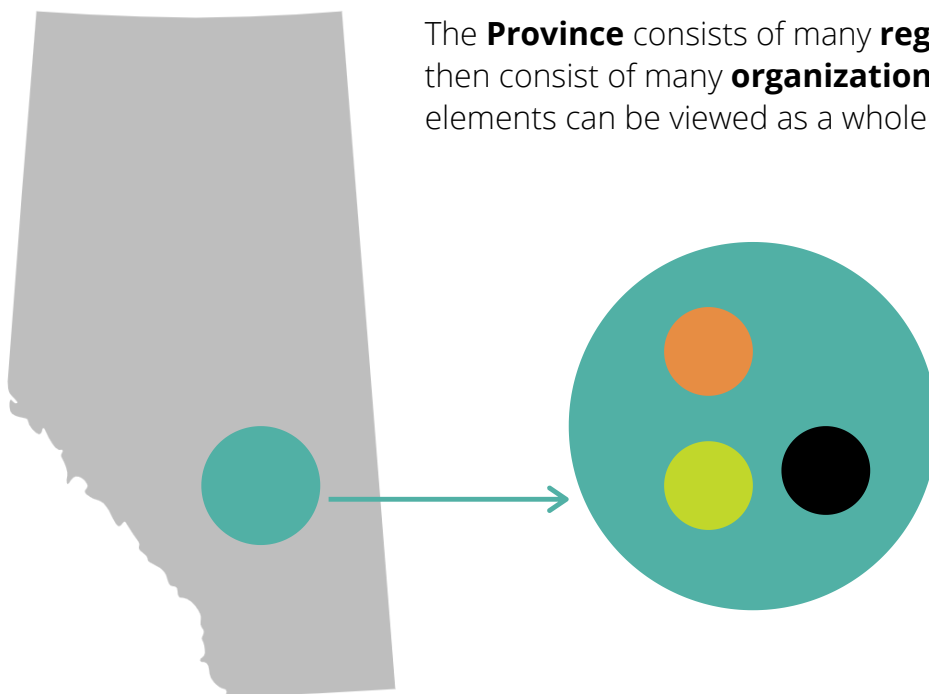
Imagining the Whole

One of the factors in a collaboration's ability to fulfill the potential of combining strengths of multiple diverse organizations and sectors, is the ability of members to see the collaboration space as a whole.

Systems thinking identifies components as both wholes and parts. In a multi-organization Regional Hub, organizations are wholes – and at the same time they are parts of a larger regional area. Another way of describing this is to identify subsystems as wholes, but parts of a larger system. In the same manner, we can identify the organizations in the Hub as wholes, and also parts of a sector. So the Hubs are also comprised of subsystems in multiple sectors – post-secondary, healthcare, health, human services sector, and the education sector.

Being able to imagine the region as a whole in its own right, more than the simple sum of the constituent parts, will be key to finding mutual gain solutions.

Being able to imagine the Regional Hub as a whole, while respecting the member organizations as wholes as well as parts of the Hub helps the representatives on the Coordinating Committee.



The **Province** consists of many **regional hubs**, which then consist of many **organizations**. All of these elements can be viewed as a whole.

Resources



View the rest of the [Complex Collaboration Toolkit](#)

Questions for Consideration

- What challenges has your organization encountered when entering in to collaborations? How have you navigated those challenges?
- What strategies does your organization currently use to work toward productive collaborations? Are there new strategies identified in this tool that would fit the context of your collaborations?