

Memo to CIAIP Grantees

March 2011

This document provides the text to the accompanying slide show – *A Sustainability Overview* – created and narrated by Phil Stafford. For the next CIAIP conference call, dedicated to the topic, we ask you to review the slide show and, if you are willing, prepare a 2 – 3 minute description of one deliberate and substantive activity you are undertaking to sustain the outcomes associated with your initiative. Please describe how your activity fits within one of the eight categories of action planning cited in the slide show. Select an activity that you feel is moving you forward and would be of interest to your colleagues. But feel free to describe the difficulties associated with this action.

To effectively organize the discussion, please email Phil at staffor@indiana.edu

in the week preceding the call if you wish to speak. If no one speaks, it won't be much of a call!

You can download the slide show here:

<https://www.slashtmp.iu.edu/files/download?FILE=staffor%2F13520ayNWRC>

Your password to view the file is: [sustainability](#)

Slide Show Text (click the little bell icon to hear the narration)

1) The Power of Midstream...

Being at the midpoint of your initiative, it's timely to both reflect on where you have been and project yourself into the future. While some might argue that, like evaluation, sustainability planning must occur as early as possible, the fact is, at the beginning, you really don't know what is going to work. At this point in your project, you probably have a sense of what works in some areas, and what doesn't in others. Similarly, you have enough time ahead of you, before your funding runs out, to make mid-course corrections, jettison some of your original goals, and put your eggs in the most productive baskets. A reality check can be difficult, however, and you need to make sure your funder is along for the ride. Most funders know that a project that is all roses and no thorns is rare indeed. *Slide change.*

2) But let's start at the beginning, with a definition of sustainability...

One of the best definitions I have seen is provided by the Finance Project, a multi-site research project recently funded by a group of foundations. In their excellent Sustainability Handbook, we find that ***"Sustainability depends on developing a clear, sensible, and convincing plan for putting in place and keeping in place the key elements that make an initiative successful. It inevitably requires adequate funding to keep it going. But it also requires an array of other resources: political, technical, and administrative. Figuring out***

what resources you need and how to marshal them is what sustainability planning is all about. Slide change.

- 3) “We need the money” is not a compelling argument for sustaining your effort. Slide change.
- 4) In subsequent slides, I will take you through a series of critical questions that need to be asked as you develop a sustainability plan for your project. It’s a good idea to organize a team for this purpose, and not do this in a vacuum. Many of the answers to these questions cannot be answered by the person in charge. Some questions address on the ground issues that might best be pondered by your front line staff or even consumers of your services. Some questions need contributions from your evaluation specialist. Some of the most important questions should be asked by your superiors in the organization or by board members. And, for others, you need an outside objective party to give you honest feedback. If you are thinking strategically, you will include people who may be important connections to future funding. If they buy in now to your sustainability plan, so much the better.

These questions can’t all be answered in a single sit-down meeting, though you might consider starting with a retreat. Instead, think about these questions as an agenda for a series of meetings and inquiries to take place over a two- three month period. If you document your process, writing the plan at the end can happen rather quickly. Slide change.

- 5) Vision.

Sorry to do this to you, but re-visiting your mission is the place to start. It’s like having blocks at the starting line – it provides a solid foundation for springing forward and assures everyone is on the same line. Remember your elevator speech in D.C.? I am guessing that some of you might have been surprised how difficult this was, even after 14 months of work. Clarifying and articulating what *exactly* you are doing and *why* you are doing it (joining your mission to your vision) is not an easy thing to do. When you get your team together, try this at the first meeting... without any prior conversation, ask each person to describe what the intended outcome of the project is (on a yellow 5 x 7 card) and how what the team is doing will get you there (on a second, pink, card). Make sure each person starts with the yellow card. After ten minutes, post the cards on the wall in two vertical columns, with the yellow cards on the left, and their accompanying pink cards on the right. Use this as an opportunity to assess the degree to which each person shares the same vision and the same logic that connects activities to outcomes.

Sound a bit like a logic model? It should, because that’s what it is, which brings us to our *next slide*.

6) Results Orientation

If you are going to convince anyone that your project is worthwhile, you will need to assemble evidence. This is the time to ask whether all that data you are collecting relates in any way to the outcomes you are trying to achieve. If you have framed your outcomes in terms of community change or system change, you had better be settling on indicators to measure that others would agree represent that change. If you have framed your outcomes in terms of individual behavioral or attitudinal change, then you should be collecting individual data that can be aggregated to show overall impact. Don't confuse the program with the outcome. The presence of a new program may be a great thing, but it is *not* an outcome. Remember, the tea partiers are out there ready to pounce and this is their mantra.

Spending some time thinking about your results and how you will communicate them is time well invested. It will direct your thinking from here – help you frame your financial plan and help you “segment” the audiences you need to reach for future support. *Slide change.*

7) Strategic financing orientation.

“I spend half my life writing grants.” Heard this before? Many of us have been in that position. These days, especially, churning out proposal after proposal seems to provide diminishing returns. Grant proposals will, indeed, be an important part of your sustainability portfolio. Too often, however, we don't think strategically about grants, and just go after everything remotely related to our project. It's not the best use of your time. If you have, however, invested careful thought into producing a clear vision, have a compelling theory of change and can produce early results, your grant writing efforts will be both easier and more successful. You will be in a better position to know what grants to go after, and better positioned to act quickly, by “plugging in” your boilerplate material, while adapting to specific funding opportunities. You can use the time saved to investigate entirely different funding strategies through your team, whether they be extant reimbursement systems, fundraisers, or even unrelated business income. Remember, there can significant opportunity costs associated with certain funding strategies. Watch out for wild goose chases, however attractive the idea. And watch out for big annual fundraisers unless you have a significant volunteer base to take it on. *Slide change*

8) Broad Based Community Support and Key Champions

Broad based community support and, on the next slide, key champions, represent poles along a continuum of necessary supports you want to cultivate. John Beilenson's model of strategic communication plays a huge role in this arena and I can't begin to address this in any detail as well as John. Again, going back to your vision is the place to start. Begin by asking just who would have a stake in this vision. Who can play a role in carrying it out and who will be affected if it comes to pass? It's a serious question, and deserves a systematic, in depth

analysis. For a good overview of a method for conducting a “stakeholder analysis” see the book *Future Search*, by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff. Different audiences will, of course, require differing approaches. For key champions, the most important medium is face to face communication. For other audiences a media strategy might be your course of action. Sorry to say it yet another time, but you’ll find you need to re-visit your results to provide both the stories and the data necessary to help those audiences connect what you do to what matters to them. *Slide change*

9) Adaptability.

I’ve argued that you need a clear vision- a magnetic pole to help your team stay on the path you’ve determined is the right one. In reality, many of you are trying to walk in shifting sands and just when you think things are going well, some key person leaves the scene, some foundation changes its priorities, a hospital partner gets gobbled up by a bigger fish. Suddenly, your sustainability plan doesn’t make sense. Perhaps the program itself needs to change direction. In any case, one can see how adaptability and flexibility are important organizational strengths. Perhaps “scenario planning” might be a useful drill for your sustainability or leadership team to consider. Ask yourselves the “what if” questions. “What if we lost 20% of our funding?” Or, more positively, “What if we gained 20% through a major gift?” “What if our competitor went out of business?” Would you be prepared to make the necessary changes to cope, on the one hand, or to grab an opportunity, on the other? Perhaps, the better question, would you know what changes to make?”

Once again, the formula for success takes you back to both your vision and your results. If the changes you have to make put your vision into question, a gut check is required. Is it really worth the effort if you can’t address the vision? Secondly, is it worth sustaining some element of your project if you can’t demonstrate success? On the positive side, if an opportunity arises and you can do more of something, you’ll select the high-performing element, right? *Slide change.*

10) Strong internal systems

Several of the CIAIP projects are embedded within large organizations. For your project, that’s an incredible asset you should be taking advantage of. If you access to good financial controls, human resources, and management information systems, these will stand you well with possible funders. If you have access to development officers, so much the better. The trick for you is to position your program as an indispensable piece of the puzzle. Seek champions at higher levels within your organization. Get to know the people who pull the levers. Get others to pay your bills out of their budgets. Become a member of the team and get beyond the perception that you or your program is an outlier, just a pilot. At the same time, take advantage of your role as an innovator in the community so that when your boss, your board members, your colleagues are out in the community, they hear good things about you.

Being embedded in a large organization is a mixed blessing. You may have creature comforts but you also risk getting lost in the shuffle. One person's creature comfort is another person's strict bureaucratic control. That's where the start-up, the free standing program has an advantage. There may be plenty of autonomy and lots of flexibility to innovate and be creative. It's certainly exciting. Yet, as the Finance Project has discovered, strong internal systems will save the day when it comes to sustainability. Future funders, volunteers, advocates and champions won't want to be associated with a program that is not run with competence and professionalism. *Slide change*

11) A sustainability plan

So we come to the end of the beginning – the sustainability plan. If you have taken the time to conduct a serious and systematic self-assessment, the plan is a piece of cake. In written form, it articulates your vision, explains how what you are doing can bring that vision forward and provides early evidence of that causal relationship. It identifies current and future stakeholders that need to be brought into the fold and specifies how that will be done. It provides a simple to read logic model that spells out how activities will be counted and outcomes will be measured. Drawing upon that hard work, it outlines a financial strategy that, in the subsequent months and years of the project will enable the outcomes to be sustained. It notes that there are multiple paths to achieving these desired outcomes and that some outcomes might best be sustained by spinning something off to another partner. For systems change outcomes, the work might be done. Perhaps you have changed the way people operate, the way people think about something. If so, you are to be congratulated and you can move on to another venture.

Sustainability takes many forms. Sustaining an outcome does not necessarily mean sustaining a program. Doing a sustainability plan will help you know the difference. *Slide change.*

12) Thanks for listening! –END-