
Assessing the Impact of the Victory Cup Initiative Using Ripple Effect Mapping

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Overview

Healthy cities rely on community programs to support the needs of their residents. However, the nonprofit organizations that run these programs do not exist in a vacuum, but rather as part of a greater ecosystem that includes the nonprofits themselves, the community members they serve, civic leaders and financial philanthropists. Therefore, the challenge of developing and sustaining a healthy nonprofit ecosystem is an important aspect of community development.

This study assesses the impact of the Victory Cup Initiative (VCI) on a group of Central Florida nonprofit organizations. Each year, VCI selects approximately ten local nonprofits in the Orlando area to participate in workshops to improve their storytelling, messaging, and pitching skills. These organizations then participate in the annual VCI Breakfast where they present their stories in the form of a two-minute pitch and receive financial awards that range from \$1,000 to \$20,000. Awards are based on a vote of the audience, which includes a collection of business leaders, philanthropists, and members of other civic institutions.

The data for our study comes from a community-based, participatory impact evaluation method called Ripple Effect Mapping (REM), which captures a community's shared impression of the broad impacts of a program — the “ripples” that represent system-wide impacts beyond the initial focus of a program or intervention. The key output of an REM session is a collaborative mind map created by the community stakeholders of the program that summarizes their collective view of the program's impacts and benefits.

Our results show that both early-stage and established nonprofits benefitted from their participation in VCI. Beyond the immediate goal of improving their storytelling and messaging skills, participants in our study reported that VCI helped them establish personal and professional relationships with other leaders, build support networks, clarify their organizations' strategic goals, and establish connections with for-profit business leaders and funding organizations. These findings have implications for both the future of Victory Cup, as well as other accelerator programs seeking to build healthy nonprofit ecosystems in their communities.

Ripple Effect Mapping

Ripple Effect Mapping is a method of program evaluation which engages stakeholders to reflect and collaboratively map a program's history and impact. REM was originally developed in agricultural extension work to investigate the impacts of interventions on entire communities, particularly second-order qualitative effects that could not be easily captured through direct quantitative measures (Kollock et al., 2012). REM is simple, inexpensive, and capable of capturing complex interactions across distance and time. An REM session is also frequently motivating for the participants, and can be an effective way to reaffirm the values of a program or as a capstone marking the end of an implementation period.

An REM session is organized like an extended think-pair-share discussion activity and typically takes two to three hours to complete. In addition to the participants, who represent stakeholders in the program being assessed, there is at least one primary facilitator who manages the event and discussions, and one or two co-facilitators who assist with the group mind mapping portion of the session. Our group included eighteen individuals—thirteen women and five men—who held either a permanent staff position or a long-term volunteer role in a nonprofit organization that had previously participated in the VCI program.

The session proceeds as follows:

1. The facilitator welcomes the participants, gives an overview of the process, and answers any initial questions. The research process and any uses of the data generated by the session are also discussed at this time; participants are asked to complete consent forms authorizing their participation before the session continues.
2. Participants consider and free-write individual responses to a short prompt. This first activity is intentionally open and is intended to stimulate reflection. There is no required format for the responses and participants can write as much or as little as they wish. (10-15 minutes).
3. Participants group into pairs and engage each other in structured interviews, using question guides provided by the facilitators. The interview questions

emphasize collecting specific stories related to the program (often phrased as *Tell me about a time when. . .*) and an appreciative approach to inquiry, where the focus is on the successes and positive elements of the program (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011). (20-30 minutes).

4. The largest part of the session is the full-group collaborative mind mapping activity, which engages all participants and provides an opportunity to make connections between different program impacts. The facilitator prompts the participants to share the thoughts and experiences that emerged during their reflections and interviews. The discussion can be structured, perhaps working through the interview questions one a time, or free. The facilitator helps manage the flow of topics and asks follow-up questions when appropriate. As themes emerge from the discussion, the co-facilitators draw out a mind map on a large piece of paper taped to the wall at the front of the room. This portion of the event can also be recorded and supplemented with the facilitators' notes. (50-75 minutes).
5. The session ends with closing statements and a short discussion regarding how the findings of the study may be obtained by participants.

The final outputs of the session include the written individual reflections and pair interview responses, the collaborative mind map produced by the full group, the audio recording of the complete discussion, and the facilitators' notes and observations. These artifacts can then be used as the starting point for further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Results and Key Themes

Collaborative Mind Mapping Themes

Figure 1 shows the mind map produced during our session, transcribed into electronic form using the XMind software package. The participants' discussion centered around eight major themes, which they identified as the primary impacts of the Victory Cup program on their organizations.

Storytelling. This theme encompasses the group's discussion of the storytelling workshops and their experiences presenting at the VCI Breakfast. In particular, participants discussed how the storytelling workshops and practice sessions forced them to refine their messages and "think bigger" by developing more ambitious and emotionally-resonant presentations. Multiple participants also saw the Breakfast presentation as an opportunity to speak on behalf of disadvantaged members of the community, who do not typically have access to a audience of hundreds of corporate and civic leaders.

Intersections and Knowledge. Two related themes capture the ideas of participants connecting with other and with the community. Raising awareness — of

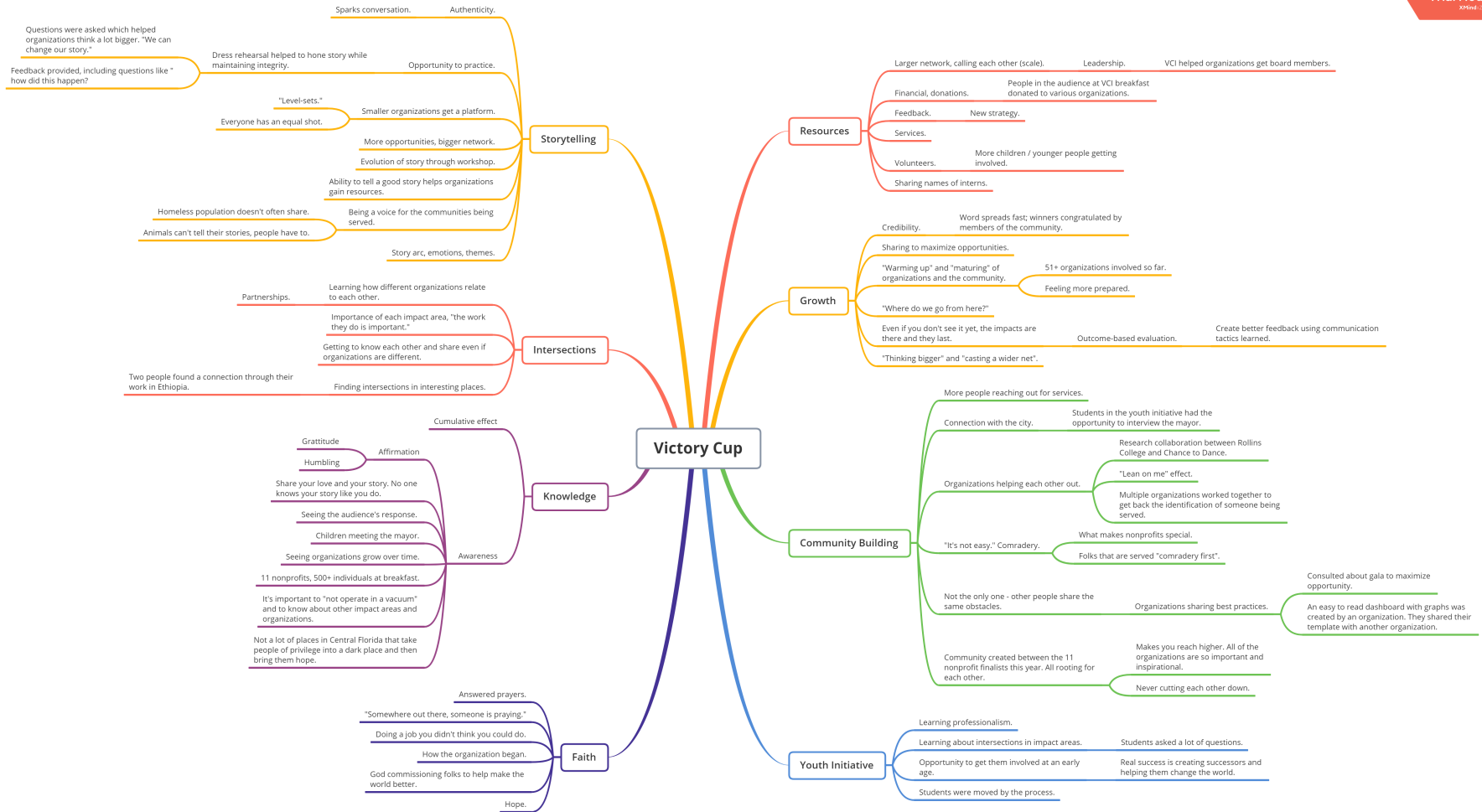


Figure 1: Collaborative mind map of the impacts of the VCI program.

both specific organizations and broader issues — was a major point of discussion during the session. Participants spoke of the value of learning about other organizations and the importance of not working “in a vacuum” as a nonprofit leader. Multiple participants saw the annual Breakfast as an opportunity to bring awareness to challenging social problems. For example, one participant who serves victims of human trafficking noted that there not many opportunities to “take people of privilege into a dark place and then bring them hope.” Another noted that VCI can help raise the profile of an issue with community leaders, and stated that support for anti-trafficking organizations has grown after multiple organizations working in that area presented at the annual Breakfast.

Faith. A subset of participants spoke directly to the importance of faith and belief in their work. Discussion in this area centered on the importance of feeling a “call” from God to do difficult, emotionally-challenging work in the community, as well as the important of connecting with other people of faith and deriving emotional support from prayer. One participant said that she derived motivation and support from a belief that “somewhere out there, someone is praying.”

Resources and Growth. Increasing resources for organizations is a direct goal of VCI, both through the cash awards given at the annual Breakfast and through follow-on connections between organizations and donors. In addition to financial donations, participants spoke about gaining other kinds of resources: recruiting new, talented board members was an important topic, as was increasing volunteer support. Participants discussed how participation in VCI gave them additional credibility and visibility with community leaders, with members of smaller or recently-established organizations stating that they saw VCI participation as an important step in legitimizing and maturing their organizations. Finally, some participants gave examples of VCI participation leading them to reevaluate their strategies and scope by “thinking bigger” and “casting a wider net”. One participant noted that interaction with other leaders at VCI helped his organization transition to an outcome-based evaluation plan with a greater awareness of feedback and messaging within the organization.

Community Building. The opportunity to connect with and learn from other leaders was a major theme of the session. Almost every participant noted a spirit of camaraderie that existed among the organizations and valued opportunity to connect with others that understand the challenges of nonprofit leadership. As one participant noted, “It’s not easy” and that there was a “lean-on-me” effect of organizations supporting each other and facing the same challenges. Multiple participants shared stories of a time that they leveraged a direct connection that developed through VCI, such as helping a human trafficking victim acquire new identification.

Youth Initiative. The Youth Initiative teams students from local middle schools with nonprofit finalists to produce short films that share the organizations’ stories with the community. Student teams work together to plan, conduct interviews,

produce, and edit a short film. They worked directly with a nonprofit organization and ultimately grew invested in local impact areas. In the REM session, participants shared that the students were “poised”, “smart”, and “professional.” Youth selected the organizations they wanted to work with and were touched by the experience. VCI participants felt that by getting involved at a young age, these students may develop into adults who can change the world.

Discussion and Reflection Themes

Building Relationships

Growing awareness. Participants spoke about increasing their awareness of other impact areas, nonprofit organizations, and community programs. When asked to write about a positive experience she had during her participation in VCI, participant #4 responded “Learning about all the deserving nonprofits that were selected. Their mission statements were inspiring. So much good work is being done in the community for positive change.” Participants went so far as to mention specific nonprofit organizations and impact areas that they learned about. For instance, participant #2 mentioned two of the other nonprofit finalists along with their impact areas. This response shows that the participant not only grew aware of other nonprofit organizations in Central Florida but learned about the critical issues that they tackle and the core services through which they benefit the community.

Forming personal connections. Participants also emphasized the numerous relationships, both organizational and personal, that they formed with other nonprofit leaders as a result of VCI activities. In reflections and interviews, they often mentioned specific individuals and organizations that they connected with. Participants found value in opportunities to form such connections. As an example of participants valuing opportunities to connect with other nonprofit leaders, participant #9 said in his reflection that “[he] especially liked the happy hour after the storytelling event. It was nice to interact more freely with the other organizations and connect with them a little in a more personal environment.” Participant #11 said in her reflection, “I learned that I wanted to know more about many of my cohort group, so I decided to invite them for breakfast in our studio to see possible intersections and where they may cross.”

Participants spoke about the value of supporting each other throughout their VCI experience, even though they were in competition to receive funding. According to an interview with participant #3, “Being last to present, the ‘butterflies’ were strong, but everyone encouraged and rooted for each other. The support and camaraderie was really heart-warming.” One sentiment which was discussed in the REM session was how, for participants, knowing that they are not in a vacuum feels good. They all aim to create positive change and it is important that they can call on each other.

Utilizing connections. New relationships between nonprofit organizations enabled them to work together. During the group discussion, one participant spoke about how being part of a VCI cohort led to a “lean-on-me” effect that encouraged collaboration on issues of shared interest. Connections formed through VCI made a difference, for example by allowing human trafficking victims to receive immediate help obtaining identification. Nonprofit participants even shared best practices and resources with each other. For instance, one nonprofit organization created a dashboard for board members, and shared the template to another organization. Ultimately, the connections formed through VCI were utilized in ways that expanded the capacity and increased the overall performance of individual nonprofits.

Improving Performance and Enhancing Operations

Increasing resources. Participants discussed opportunities to receive resources such as additional funding. For example, organization J and organization C won award money from VCI, but they also received checks from individuals that attended the event. However, resources gained through VCI were not limited to financial resources. When participant #15 was asked in his interview to share a connection he made because of VCI, he mentioned a connection “with a new board member from [a local health organization].” Other nonprofit finalists also gained board members, as well as spaces to meet and more. These newfound resources were made possible because of the connections formed through VCI, and they helped participating nonprofit organizations to keep growing. Attendees of the VCI Breakfast also become new volunteers at the presenting organizations. Participant #18 said, “a recently graduated college student was inspired to sign-up immediately to help.” Additionally, participant #13 said she anticipated VCI impacting her future work because she can “encourage volunteers through storytelling.” She explained that “Telling [her organization’s] stories will engage more volunteers and broaden [their] reach.”

Clarifying mission and strategy. As part of the process of preparing their stories for the VCI Breakfast, nonprofit participants had the chance to think introspectively regarding their organization’s mission. When asked to write about a positive experience he had during his VCI participation, participant #6 said

As a new staff member at [organization D], as of December, I was still (and am still) learning [organization D’s] story - who we help, how we help, what we do? the people! The Victory Cup served as an opportunity to learn more of these things. It granted me an entire perspective on the community of people with disabilities - with [the director’s] story acting as a catalyst.

In this way, participants learned more about the organizations that they represent and continued to develop their perspectives. Additionally, they thought critically about how they might change their story. In the REM session, participant #5 said

that the VCI dress rehearsal inspired his group to cast a wider net and elevate the vision of their organization. In this way, they not only reflected on their organization's mission, but took steps towards developing it.

Participation in VCI motivated some organizations to develop a new strategic plan or rethink an existing plan. Participant #5 mentioned in his interview some of the ways that his organization is changing their strategy. His organization now aims to “act as a business,” and they consider questions such as, “do we expand outside of Central FL?” The participant also mentioned that his organization is exploring potential for growth, creating a marketing plan, and considering their strategy for the next few years. In the REM session, other organizations also mentioned how they are using tactics that they learned from VCI. For example, participant #15 mentioned during the session that his organization is implementing VCI strategies by holding a workshop to create better feedback loops within their organization.

Improving Storytelling and Messaging

VCI participation enabled nonprofit leaders to learn the elements of a good story and make their stories more intriguing through feedback and advice. When asked to share a positive experience she had during her VCI participation, participant #13 responded,

The storytelling workshop — I enjoyed learning from [VCI] about the importance of telling a story and what that looks like — visual images — painting a picture to the person that's listening and leading up to a final thought or climax — having a beginning, middle, and end. Show don't tell. Paint a picture.

Participant #5 mentioned the dress rehearsal in his interview, saying that “feedback was spot on.” The training VCI administered through these events was well received by nonprofit finalists and was ultimately successful in helping them improve their storytelling.

Nonprofit participants did not simply tell a story but captured their audience and incited inspirational and emotional responses. Participant #4 said in her interview that “the day of — every organization told a story that you could connect with. Every story had a connection. Everyone was touched.” By connecting on this level with their audience, participants were able to inspire action towards positive change. However, nonprofit participants themselves were also touched by the VCI storytelling experience. Participant #10 said in her reflection, “Taking first place in the VCI Breakfast was a shocker for me. To be judged by 500 people on the work I have given my life to was so overwhelming. It has been hard to raise money for a cause that people did not know existed.” The opportunity to share her organization's story and the response from the community incited such an emotion response that it even resonated with her faith, and she added “this experience reaffirmed my call from God that I am on the right path!”

As a result of improved storytelling skills and the opportunity to share their polished stories, nonprofit participants were able to increase their organization's impact. In the REM session, participants discussed the importance of sharing the stories of the communities that they serve. For example, families that have experienced homelessness rarely want to tell their stories because they want to forget that part of their lives. However, by telling a compelling story, nonprofit leaders can gather support from the community. Participants including participant #15 recognize the potential in this newly developed skill. He shared in his interview that he sees VCI impacting his organization's future work by "developing so many relationships because of [his] ability to tell stories and draw support."

The Community Capitals Framework

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) (Flora et al., 2005) defines seven dimensions of community resources that play a role in building healthy and sustainable cities and regions.

1. **Natural capital.** The natural resources and environment of a particular place. which can include traditional exploitable resources, but also encompasses weather, natural features, beauty, and geographic location.
2. **Cultural capital.** The traditions, language, heritage, and other expressions of the peoples that live in a community.
3. **Human capital.** The ability for community members to acquire new resources, develop knowledge, and pursue opportunities. This capital also encompasses the values of inclusive and proactive community leadership.
4. **Social capital.** Connections between individuals and organizations that contribute to development. *Bonding* social capitals are tighter connections that build cohesion within a community. *Bridging* social capitals are looser ties that connect different organizations and subgroups (Emery and Flora, 2006).
5. **Political capital.** Access to centers of power, government officials, and the political process. This capital also encompasses the capacity of community members to advocate for their own interests.
6. **Financial capital.** Assets available to support capacity-building, including investments in business, social entrepreneurship, and future community development.
7. **Built capital.** Physical infrastructure that supports the other capitals, including buildings, transportation, utilities, and digital connectivity.

The CCF is frequently used in extension work, because it acknowledges that communities have many different kinds of assets that can contribute to development

(Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer, 2016). Although a single program is unlikely to address all seven capitals, a collection of programs can lead to a “spiraling up”, where progress in one area lays the groundwork for growth in others, forming a beneficial and mutually reinforcing cycle of improvement.

Our analysis shows that Victory Cup has been effective in increasing the capacity of organizations in four areas: human, social, political, and financial.

Capital	Contributions
Human	<p>Participation in VCI was a driver of organizational leadership development</p> <p>Storytelling workshop forces organizations to understand and clarify their own missions</p> <p>Exposure to other organizations’ stories may prompt new strategic thinking; some participants were lead to become more ambitious in the vision and reach of their programs</p>
Social	<p>Participants created new personal connections with other nonprofit leaders</p> <p>Connections were a source of encouragement and social support; participants learned that other leaders were facing the same challenges</p> <p>Leaders’ gained new awareness of community issues outside of their own organizations</p> <p>More members of the community connected with organizations for help and services</p> <p>Storytelling workshop helped members within an organization bond by learning each other’s stories in new detail</p> <p>Some participants bonded over shared faith</p> <p>Participants recruited new volunteers, including from demographics outside their traditional volunteer bases</p>
Political	<p>VCI gives participants the opportunity to speak directly to hundreds of community leaders at one time and in one place</p>

Participants felt that being in VCI enhanced their credibility and legitimacy. This was particularly true for newer and smaller organizations.

The annual Breakfast presentation includes hundreds of community leaders representing business, philanthropy, and civic institutions

Participants were able to recruit new board members and advisors

Presentations at the annual Breakfast raise leaders' awareness of community issues

Presentations by multiple organizations working on the same issue have a cumulative awareness-raising effect; this is particularly valuable for organizations that work on “dark” and challenging issues like human trafficking

Financial

VCI awards direct prizes of \$1,000 to \$20,000 at the annual Breakfast

Participants receive further donations from Breakfast attendees and philanthropic organizations

Lessons learned through the storytelling workshop are directly applicable to fundraising

Participants gained more volunteers

In this framework, VCI contributes to the growth of the nonprofit ecosystem in Central Florida by forming stronger social ties between peer nonprofit leaders (bonding ties) and between nonprofits and other community leaders (bridging ties). In particular, VCI is highly effective at giving organizations opportunities to increase their political leverage — in the broad sense of that term — and visibility with leaders, which leads to follow-on effects of increased engagement and fundraising. VCI has also contributed to leadership development within its participating organizations: first, through improved messaging and storytelling, but also through an increased emphasis on clarity of mission and strategic thinking.

Conclusion

The nonprofit ecosystem in a community grows stronger when organizations are better connected to each other and to the network of funders and civic leaders that support nonprofit work. Drawing upon the collective experience of Victory

Cup participants, this study has shown that VCI is effective in creating these connections, leading to positive development for the organizations and leaders that have taken part in the program. Our results have implications both for VCI and for other nonprofit incubators and accelerators. In particular, programs can be effective when they simultaneously develop the personal leadership qualities of their participants, forge deeper social bonds between nonprofit organizations, and promote mutually beneficial connections between nonprofits and the broader community. Our results make a convincing case for the value of the Victory Cup Initiative within the Central Florida nonprofit ecosystem. Future research in this area can focus on both the longer-term impacts of VCI on its participating organizations and Ripple Effect Mapping studies with other regional nonprofit development and training programs.

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