

Practices in Action

Our research suggests that social capital can play a vital role in program success. We have identified the emerging practices below as useful ways to build and leverage social capital. For each practice, we provide a description of the relationship between that practice and the different types of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking. We also emphasize certain key points and considerations for using these practices and present sidebars that illustrate how different programs across the country are implementing them.



Helpful Tip

Peer groups are particularly valuable because they enable individuals dealing with similar challenges to develop trusting relationships over time and move toward similar personal goals. For this reason it may not always be appropriate to mix people who are in crisis situations (such as those actively experiencing homelessness or domestic violence) with people who are not. When a peer group does include people in immediate crisis, those individuals will likely need additional support to meet immediate needs before they can focus on developing meaningful bonds.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building social capital in a human services program. Every program is different, with a different context and with different values and goals. Staff, program managers, and directors know best the population they are trying to serve. This handbook sets out some of the emerging practices, suggests options to consider when thinking about what might work for you, and provides resources and activities to help you find the best fit for your program and participants.

Peer Groups

Case studies, site visits, and expert consultations revealed that using peer groups or cohorts can provide support to and foster accountability among participants. When peers work together, each person's individual network and social capital becomes part of a larger network, ideally forming a peer-based safety net and resource web. In this way, individual agency and social capital are also enhanced.

In determining whether or how to use this emerging practice in your program, consider the following aspects of implementation.

Size

To be successful, peer groups are often small enough to allow participants to become meaningfully acquainted. A manageable size will help group members notice when someone is missing or not speaking and feel somewhat accountable to their peers. On the other hand, successful groups are typically large enough that individuals do not feel “under the microscope,” intimidated or pressured to disclose.

Facilitation

In some programs that we studied, peer groups had facilitators. These facilitators typically possessed a skill set that included knowing how to keep discussions on track, when to lead and when to have participants lead, and how to help participants set shared group norms and goals. It also seems to work well when the facilitator, if there is one, can relate to participants. With the right training and skills, peers, such as current or past participants, can make excellent facilitators.

Frequency and Structure

Peer groups often meet regularly (for example, weekly or monthly), and it is often preferable to have consistent membership. While some programs have peer groups whose membership evolves over time, many try to develop “cohorts” so that the same individuals regularly meet with each other, strengthening the bonds that develop among them. This consistency can build reciprocal relationships in which participants learn from, draw strength from, and feel personally responsible to others. These relationships can make participants active and empowered group partners, committed to achieving shared goals.

Agenda

Depending on the program goals and participants, peer groups may have a formal or informal agenda. In some cases, an official curriculum is used; in others, participants play a stronger role in deciding the focus. A formal approach may be more predictable or easier to administer and monitor, while a more organic approach may provide increased flexibility to address issues of highest concern and interest to participants at a given time. Either type of agenda may meet the needs of participants with some form of shared experience or situation, such as those who are reentering their community after prison release, are experiencing single parenthood, or belong to working families that have children in the same early care and education setting.

Composition

Peer groups consisting of at least some members who already have an existing positive relationship with each other may more easily facilitate relationship-building throughout the group. On the other hand, if those existing bonds are too strong, they might make it difficult for others to connect.

Accountability

In the programs we studied, participants routinely cited accountability to other participants as one of the greatest benefits of peer groups. When peers develop sufficient levels of trust and reciprocity among each other, they are more willing to hold each other accountable for achieving goals. Accountability mechanisms may be fairly formal (written down, for example) or somewhat informal (discussed as a group, for example). Group participants are typically accountable to themselves and to each other, and not to externally imposed rules.

How peer groups build . . .

Bonding social capital: *Using peer groups in programs is ideal for building bonds between people in similar circumstances.*

Each person brings knowledge, experience, and personal social networks of family and friends to the table. Similar circumstances may imply similar needs and assets. Cultivating one-on-one and peer-group relationships over time, through regular interaction and shared experiences, fosters the development of trust and the sharing of personal assets. Group members can participate in reciprocal activities that help each other “get by” or achieve economic mobility, such as babysitting or home repairs.

Bridging social capital: As bonds between individual group members develop and grow, it may become apparent that, while peers are similar in some respects, they also are different in others that may have important implications for the types of networks they can access. For example, a peer group of parents at a Head Start center may include parents who work in different job sectors and can provide connections across these diverse networks.

Linking social capital: Peer groups may include members with connections to individuals or organizations in positions of power. For example, a judge or lawyer may be a member of a peer group for individuals in recovery from substance use. That person could link other group members to legal supports to help them address any related criminal justice issues.

Emerging Practices in Action:

[Connections to Success](#)²² is a mentoring and self-sufficiency program based in the St. Louis and Kansas City metropolitan areas. Its goal is to provide lifelong mentoring for its participants. Ten to fifteen individuals engage as a group in 60 hours of intensive professional-development training over two weeks. Highly interactive activities and discussions about personal aspirations and struggles create strong bonds between members and a sense of a shared journey. This peer bonding is maintained after the training with weekly family-focused connection groups that include dinners, games, and child care.

[Family Independence Initiative–Detroit \(FII-Detroit\)](#)²³ is part of a nationwide organization that uses social capital practices to help low-income families become more self-sufficient. In its economic-mobility program, low-income families form cohorts of six to eight people, often with some who are family or already friends. For two years, the cohort holds monthly meetings in which members discuss goals and struggles and hold each other accountable to previous commitments. Based on families’ feedback, FII-Detroit is also shifting its online UpTogether platform so that members can form small groups on their own, without in-person, staff-based enrollments. Groups will be able to access interactive digital tools for sharing social support and practical resources to help each other reach their goals and connect with other groups across shared interests or geography. In this strengths-based social network, groups connect with each other to share the robust resources they already have in their relationships.

Manager's Worksheet:

Planning and Implementing Peer Groups

Although the preceding pages include information on how other programs have approached building social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or expand use of this practice to improve individual outcomes in your program.

To what extent do your program participants share a common set of characteristics, experiences, situations, challenges, and/or goals?
Given the above, could peer groups help participants better achieve their goals? To what extent? How would the successful use of peer groups relate to your program’s overall mission?
Which staff roles or individuals might be best suited to facilitating a peer group? Are there current participants who might be interested and successful in this role with the right training?
What group size would be large enough for participant groups to include diverse perspectives and resources but small enough to facilitate strong interpersonal bonds?
Taking into account participant schedules, priorities, time needed to progress toward goals, and other relevant factors, how frequently should groups meet?
To what extent should the group have consistent membership, even if not everyone can attend every meeting?
Is your objective to use the peer group to build bonding capital, bridging capital, linking capital, or some combination of these? How does that affect the way you structure the group?
How might your program help a peer group set its own rules, structure, schedule, and content?

Meaningful Engagement

Social capital involves creating trusting connections—for example, between program participants and members of the community. Organizations can try to encourage participants to maintain this engagement. Through time and energy, this investment in social capital connections will ensure that individuals continue to benefit from these relationships.

The programs we studied use several strategies to improve the quality of participants' relationships with each other and program staff.

Longevity of Relationships

Long-term engagement can greatly enhance meaningful relationships. Many of the programs we examined engage participants for at least a year. However, such long-term engagement may not be appropriate for every program. Some shorter programs may provide opportunities for a greater number of or for more intense relationships, and others may informally encourage relationships after the formal program ends.

Frequency of Meetings

While there is no standard frequency for how often a group or pair should meet, frequent interactions can allow connections to develop. However, success is not measured solely by how often individuals or groups meet. Rather, the interactions themselves must be meaningful enough to increase trust and encourage connections, and they must be organized in a way that will enhance program outcomes.

Alumni Engagement

Programs can intentionally encourage relationships to continue informally after participants formally leave a program. Some groups keep meeting for years, building relationships that evolve and continue to be valuable as group member needs evolve. An example would be an annual dinner for all current and former program participants.

How meaningful relationships build . . .

Bonding social capital: Programs can try to create opportunities for meaningful engagement between participants and others with similar backgrounds, such as alumni. *These efforts can create bonds among those who have similar histories with program engagement or other experiences.*

Bridging social capital: Individuals or groups with different backgrounds or experiences can build meaningful relationships and help each other tap into new and diverse networks.

Linking social capital: Individuals or groups can deeply connect with program staff or volunteers in positions of power who can help them navigate toward needed resources.

Emerging Practices in Action

Thread,²⁴ a Baltimore, Maryland nonprofit, uses social capital approaches with high school students with opportunity and achievement gaps to help them succeed. The students are matched with volunteers and remain in the program for 10 years—all the way through high school and 6 years thereafter.

Roca Inc.²⁵ relentlessly stays in the lives of high-risk young men and young mothers aged 17–24 for 4 years, providing them with unconditional love, consistency, and safety when they need it most. Roca supports young people through setbacks and challenges them to think differently and choose life consciously. With a cognitive-behavioral-theory intervention that meets them on the streets or in classes, Roca helps young people develop life-saving emotional skills to deal with trauma and practice them when life gets rough. And when they're ready, Roca teaches them job skills to live a stable life. Roca is specific about whom it serves and has also expanded, having five different sites in Massachusetts and its first out-of-state replication in Baltimore, Maryland.



Did You Know?

Compared to a control group, youth who enrolled for over a year in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentoring network reported improved feelings of self-worth, higher scholastic achievement, better relationships with parents, and other positive outcomes. Those who enrolled less than three months actually reported decreased academic confidence and self-worth.²¹

Manager's Worksheet:

Facilitating Meaningful Participant Engagement

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or expand this practice to improve individual outcomes.

<p>Does your program have a straightforward way for participants to form relationships with each other, staff, mentors, or program alumni that could increase progress toward program goals?</p>
<p>To what extent do these relationships tend to be meaningful and long-lasting? How might these initial relationships be strengthened? Would it be beneficial for the people involved to meet more often or in a different context?</p>
<p>How can relationships be extended either in the formal program or beyond? For example, could the program itself be prolonged in some way so that people are more likely to keep in touch?</p>
<p>Would it make sense to increase alumni involvement with each other, the program, and its current participants? If so, how might you do that?</p>
<p>Are there uninvolved alumni who would make great mentors, champions, or examples for current participants? What are the barriers to connecting with these alumni, and how might you overcome them?</p>

Leveraging Organizational Relationships

Organizations, as well as individuals, have social capital. Organizational social capital can include, for example, a positive reputation in the community or referral networks. Building and accessing *organizational* social capital can improve your program's ability to focus on participants' *individual* social capital. Instead of seeing organizational social capital as an end goal, you may wish to focus on how it can increase *participants'* social capital.

Relationships that Further Participants' Goals

As your organization develops and strengthens its relationships and partnerships with other community organizations, consider your priorities. What sorts of networks can you build that will help individual participants achieve their goals? For example, if your participants want or need access to employment, consider leveraging your organization's networks to provide job referrals or connections to employers.

Connections from All Program Stakeholders

Some programs intentionally tap into the large and diverse stakeholder networks of as many agencies as possible, including staff, volunteers, board members, congregations, and others. Each of these individual stakeholders may have access to networks and resources that participants could benefit from accessing.

Organizational Influence and Channels

Programs and organizations may not face the same structural barriers to self-sufficiency as participants. Therefore, organizations can use their names, positions, or relationships to identify resources, open doors, and create connections for the participants they serve.

Formal and Informal Connections

Consider how you can best help program participants tap into your organizational networks. These connections may be formal (such as memoranda of understanding) or more informal (such as ad hoc collaborations developed as needed).

How organizational social capital builds . . .

Bridging social capital: Relationships among and between organizations can connect individuals in your network with people that may differ from them in other networks.

Linking social capital: By developing formal partnerships with those in positions of power (or with those connected to them) your program can help participants build linking social capital with different institutions and specific individuals within them.



Helpful Tip

Rather than providing a partner organization's general office number, consider offering the name and number of a specific person there who may be able to help with a particular issue. You may even wish to set up a conference call to introduce your program participant to the new connection.

Emerging Practices in Action

[The Community Action Project of Tulsa County \(CAP Tulsa\)](#)²⁶ develops partnerships with other organizations, including employers. Through the CareerAdvance® program, individuals receive job training in health care roles and are then often connected with employers who offer benefits (e.g., health insurance) and are able to provide participants with a career trajectory with increasing wages and other job opportunities over time. CAP Tulsa also has a reputation in the community as having families' best interests at heart, which helps it to establish trusting relationships with families.

[Roca Inc.'s](#)²⁷ program for high-risk youth serves those who have experienced extensive trauma and are the primary victims or drivers of urban violence. Roca helps reduce urban violence more effectively by intentionally identifying the system partners with the strongest influence on young people, relentlessly reaching out to them, building transformational relationships, and engaging in practices such as "peacemaking circles." Roca collaborates with police departments, probation officers, hospitals, and jails so its staff can help individual youth access, navigate, and connect to these entities as needed. Roca uses peacemaking circles to facilitate meaningful group discussions with young people and system partners about successes, goals, trauma, or conflict. Members take turns speaking uninterrupted, a practice that can create empathetic and trusting relationships, hence really engaging intuitions.

Manager's Worksheet:

Tapping into Organizational Social Capital to Increase Participants' Individual Social Capital

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or tailor this practice to help participants tap into organizational social capital to improve their individual outcomes.

<p>Unmet Participant Needs <i>What needs do your program participants have that your organization is currently unable to fully meet? Which are the participants' highest priorities?</i></p>	<p>Community Partners That Could Help <i>What organizations, entities, or individuals in the community might be able to help participants better meet these needs and goals?</i></p>	<p>Network Status <i>Does your organization already have a relationship to this potential partner? If so, to what extent? Who in your organization has these connections? Can these connections be strengthened? If not, is it possible to find someone within or outside your organization who can facilitate these connections?</i></p>	<p>Action Plan <i>What concrete steps could you take to develop or strengthen this partnership to help participants tap into your organization's social capital? Consider which partnerships are most important to prioritize in the short, medium, and long terms.</i></p>

Technology

Some programs use social media and other forms of technology to connect participants, build social capital, and work toward program goals. It is important to be thoughtful about why you are using technology and how it fits with organizational culture and participant preferences.

Technology can greatly enhance both communication and transparency, which are vital to healthy, trusting relationships. Consider the following ways your organization might expand its use of technology to help build and leverage open, trusting relationships among its participants.

Familiar Technology

Your participants and staff likely already use technology on a daily basis in their personal lives. Take advantage of this familiarity and expand the use of texting or social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, or Twitter, that are already accessible to them.

Technology as an Enhancement

No matter the type of technology your organization uses, in-person interactions have unique value. Consider how technology can *enhance* rather than *replace* in-person interactions. For example, you can use social media or texting to follow up after in-person meetings or create online communication options when in-person interactions are not possible.

Roles for Technology

In addition to enhancing participants' connections to your program and each other, technology can be used to help participants leverage social capital in other ways that lead to program success, such as supporting data collection to improve the program over time or helping current participants connect with potential new participants. The key is to use technology comprehensively and strategically to support program goals.

How technology builds . . .

Bonding social capital: Social media enables participants to easily connect with others, ask for support, and strengthen relationships. *Technology may be especially important for bonding among youth and busy families because these populations may be somewhat more likely to seek and build connections in the virtual world as well as in person.*

Bridging social capital: Virtually connecting participants to networks of diverse people can enhance bridging social capital. For example, if a program has multiple sites serving participants from different areas or neighborhoods, it can use a Facebook group to help connect these participants.

Linking social capital: Technology is a powerful tool that can empower individuals to develop linking relationships with individuals or organizations in positions of power. Various mobile applications, for example, can enable participants to reach out to other organizations that offer needed resources.

Emerging Practices in Action

The Mental health Outreach for MotherS ([MOMS](#)) Partnership, housed at the Yale School of Medicine, works to improve the mental health and economic outcomes of mothers with depressive symptoms. Through its social media application, mothers can chat with each other and earn tokens for completing social-capital-related activities, such as getting a library card. Tokens can be donated or redeemed for a gift card. The program can also track when mothers are connecting with each other virtually or in person through location data.

The Community Action Project of Tulsa County ([CAP Tulsa](#))²⁸ provides an English as a Second Language program in which participants often text each other when they need support, such as when they need a ride or are worried about a peer who is late to class. This organic use of technology helps to remove barriers to success.

Manager’s Worksheet:

Identifying and Using Technology in Your Program

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or refine this practice to improve individual outcomes.

Technology or Platforms Already Used by Participants (Including Social Media)	Prevalence <i>About what percentage of participants already use this technology or platform?</i>	Program Use <i>How could your program use this technology or platform to help participants build and use social capital and improve their outcomes?</i>

Using Data to Inform Decisions

Data are especially helpful to understand social capital connections that support your program outcomes. For example, asking reentry-program participants to list their relationships might reveal some connections likely to hinder, rather than help, a participant's efforts to avoid returning to the same circle of friends engaged in criminal activities. By [measuring relevant activities or characteristics](#), a program demonstrates to its participants that it values how they build and use social capital and helps them appreciate the roles relationships can play in their lives.²⁹

Some programs are making efforts to use stronger data practices and logic models to design more effective programs and measure social capital's impact on program results. However, organizational use of social capital data varies greatly, and many programs are in the early stages of conducting evaluations on social capital interventions and determining what data to gather.

External Expertise

Using social capital data effectively may require external resources and expertise to ensure its reliability. However, programs report that the return is usually worth the investment. Data can demonstrate effectiveness to participants, funders, and other stakeholders, and it can help managers improve the design and implementation of social capital activities.

Logic Models

Logic models are an important tool to identify areas for improvement. They are a type of map that outlines step-by-step how programs use resources and activities to achieve short- and long-term outcomes. You can use logic models to illustrate how your program helps participants specifically build and leverage social capital to meet their goals. [This tool](#)³⁰ demonstrates how human services programs can use a logic model to map out the role social capital plays in their programs. It provides hypothetical examples and a blank tool you can fill in for your own program.

How data use builds . . .

Bonding social capital: When participants are involved in the data-gathering process, they may become more aware of the number and quality of their relationships with others like them and how those relationships may help or hinder them in meeting their goals.

Bridging social capital: Gathering data on relationships can demonstrate where participants have existing relationships across diverse groups and where there are gaps. This type of data examination can help participants identify opportunities to leverage their existing connections.

Linking social capital: Programs can analyze social capital data to assess and demonstrate program impact, potentially enabling partnerships with funders or other community organizations that can lead to new connections for participants that improve outcomes.

Emerging Practices in Action

[Roca Inc.](#)³¹ uses an "efforts to outcomes" data software program that tracks the frequency and types of outreach used with youth and their networks. Volunteer researchers perform the statistical analyses. Roca's data show that the more contact the organization has with a youth, the less likely the youth is to return to a correctional facility. With a relentless, data-driven intervention model and outcomes that are best-in-class, Roca changes the landscape of opportunity for young people.

[FII-Detroit](#)³² uses its UpTogether platform, where families answer 10 questions monthly in an online journal, including a question on social capital about whom they helped that month and who helped them. They answer using a drop-down box that includes categories such as *assistance with transportation*, *child care*, *information sharing*, *aid to a sick or elderly neighbor*, and *a loan or donation of money*. They are then asked to estimate the market or dollar value of the help. Staff noted that some families report the most difficulty with this valuation data point because sharing resources comes so naturally. FII-Detroit uses these data to highlight how much social capital families exchange over time. FII-Detroit is currently reimagining this platform, using qualitative data from a human-centered design process, and future iterations of the platform will allow groups to access interactive digital tools for sharing social support and practical resources to help each other reach their goals.

Manager's Worksheet:

Using Data and Logic Models for Social Capital Decision-Making and Evaluation

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or expand this practice in your organization to improve individual outcomes. For more information, see this brief, [Measuring Social Capital in Human Services Programs](#), and this tool, [How to Include Social Capital in a Human Services Program Logic Model](#).

<p>What data points are your organization currently gathering to understand how social capital is being used in your programs? Are these data points being shared with participants? Are they being used to help participants build better connections?</p>
<p>Do you have a way for individuals to <i>assess or monitor</i> their own levels of social capital, whether bonding, bridging, or linking?</p>
<p>To what extent does your organization currently use these data points or measures, if at all? What else can your organization do with the data to evaluate and improve programming?</p>
<p>Does your organization have a logic model that explains how you plan to use social capital to help achieve program goals? Are you collecting the data you need to determine whether you are meeting program goals and to make your case to funders?</p>
<p>What other data would help your organization support social capital development? What additional resources or changes in structure would be necessary for your organization to gather this data?</p>

Fostering Opportunities for Organic Connections

Overall, the programs we examined emphasized that organic connections are the most meaningful for long-term outcomes. However, programs can take intentional steps to ensure there is a structured, supportive physical and emotional environment to more easily enable those organic connections to initially form and then grow over time.

There are several ways in which programs can try to make it easier for organic connections to form.

Food and Social Time

Many programs we reviewed help people develop relationships by creating a welcoming atmosphere. For instance, we heard numerous examples of social capital activities involving food or games when we spoke to programs.

Physical Space

Some programs reported using an open space where everyone, from the head of the organization to the newest program participant, was comfortable and open to interaction. Spaces with a lot of open seating, a comfortable temperature, and a welcoming atmosphere may encourage participants to spend time in the space and begin connecting with others there.

Structured Opportunities

Some programs use icebreakers, regular reflection times, or other structured activities to facilitate initial relationship-building. For example, a program might host a regular morning greeting exercise in a designated central workspace.

How supportive spaces and opportunities build . . .

Bonding social capital: Providing an open space large enough for several people to gather can enable participants to form meaningful relationships with each other, perhaps allowing a few peer-group participants to continue a discussion after a formal group session ends. For example, a welcoming reception area or lounge with ample seating can offer individuals the opportunity to connect.

Bridging social capital: Opportunities to connect and the spaces in which to do so are also resources important for relationship-building with individuals who differ from participants. A comfortable space can facilitate meetings between current participants and other groups or individuals, potentially enabling reciprocal relationships to form. A program organizer might say, for example, “Let’s meet at your program this week and mine the next.”

Linking social capital: Creating appropriate spaces can reduce barriers in social situations in which one person is perceived as more powerful than another. For example, a potluck dinner for participants, staff, and community partners can break down barriers and provide an opportunity for connections with individuals in positions of power to flourish.

Emerging Practices in Action

[Connections to Success](#)³⁴ forms a gratitude circle each morning. Participants in the circle take turns sharing something that each one is grateful for. The subject matter ranges from light-hearted to deeply personal, and sharing in this way provides an opening for participants to make organic connections immediately after the initial activity. Instead of a traditional break room designated for staff and volunteers, the program has a common area available to participants, staff, and volunteers to encourage equitable social interaction.

[CAP Tulsa’s](#)³⁵ Early Head Start and Head Start schools are physically designed to encourage group socialization. For example, a school might have a large entryway to allow parents to chat during pick-up and drop-off times, or a school may offer coffee or comfortable seating areas so parents and teachers can mingle on site.

Manager's Worksheet:

Creating Spaces and Opportunities that Foster Organic Connections

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<p>To what extent might increased organic connections among participants and with other organizational stakeholders improve program outcomes? How?</p>
<p>What are the most comfortable spaces or times in your organization for you and your participants to interact or for them to interact with each other?</p>
<p>In these spaces or times, can participants interact with someone from any part of the organization? Are there ways to make them more welcoming or to bring in a broader array of stakeholders?</p>
<p>How can you make “connection times” more frequent or accessible, or include more participants?</p>
<p>To what extent do existing structured activities facilitate relationship-building? Are there ways to add new structured-engagement opportunities or restructure existing ones to further program goals while creating an opportunity for relationships to begin to form?</p>
<p>To what extent does your program already use food and social time to encourage mingling and relationship-building? Are there ways to increase the opportunities for participants and other stakeholders to spend time together in a relaxed and informal environment to further program goals?</p>

Qualified Individuals or Alumni in Programming and Staffing

Developing trust *within* programs may also be important to building social capital. Intentionally hiring alumni or individuals with experiences similar to participants can increase the organization's credibility with current participants and help them establish trusting relationships with staff who have a familiar background. These staff members can serve as concrete models of success and validate the sincerity of the program for those following in their footsteps. As staff, they can also provide honest feedback for program improvement.

There are several factors to consider when selecting alumni or similar individuals to participate in programming and staffing.

Qualifications

Not all alumni will be qualified to work in a program. If qualified, however, alumni can add value in multiple ways, including working in the program, participating in social events, volunteering, and contributing their own social capital to the program.

Balance

Although alumni and other similarly experienced staffers offer a wealth of positive qualities, directors and managers may want to balance these qualities with those of other staff who have different experiences and expertise needed by the organization.

Training and Assessment

Alumni or other individuals with backgrounds similar to participants can gain relevant experience by starting as volunteers or interns. They can train and acquire valuable skills while the organization and individual mutually determine whether they would be a good fit.

How including staff with similar experiences builds . . .

Bonding social capital: Alumni or staff with past experiences similar to current program participants can understand what participants are going through. It may be easier for participants to share information and build trust. Stigma or fear about asking for help or creating new connections may be reduced if participants feel they are in a safe space and have leaders or facilitators with similar backgrounds.

Bridging social capital: Alumni or staff may be able to use shared experiences to more easily connect participants to new networks of people with different backgrounds, such as those alumni or staff formed during their upward economic mobility and success in achieving their goals during or after the program or experience.

Emerging Practices in Action

[RecycleForce](#) is an employment social enterprise in Indianapolis, Indiana, helping formerly incarcerated individuals “rebuild their lives” by providing “comprehensive social services and gainful employment” at a recycling factory. RecycleForce³⁶ promotes particularly qualified participants to serve as supervisors. These staff mentor other program participants, and offer additional insight into and support for program implementation, while simultaneously building up their own resumes.

Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison in New York State provides college education, life skills, and reentry support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Roughly three-quarters of the staff and managers are program graduates or were formerly incarcerated. The executive director credits much of his success in growing the program to the fact that he and other staff are alumni and that correctional personnel and other community leaders have witnessed the benefits of their transformation.

Manager's Worksheet:

Including Qualified Individuals or Alumni in Programming and Staffing

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or expand this practice to improve individual outcomes.

How can your alumni provide honest input for program improvement?
To what extent might hiring qualified alumni or individuals with similar experiences further program outcomes? How so?
Would program participants say that they feel their experiences are reflected in staff members' backgrounds? If not, how can you recruit and hire volunteers and staff with whom participants can relate?
How can you equip program alumni with the skills and qualifications needed to serve as staff members?
What additional support might alumni staff members need?
Which, if any, specific alumni or staff members do participants name as being role models?
What are the characteristics that make someone a role model? How can you encourage participants to build relationships with role models in the program?

Emphasis on Accountability

Accountability is a key aspect of social capital relationships. Social capital grows when people hold each other “to their word.” In some programs, interpersonal accountability may consist of agreements or commitments in which participants, peers, staff, and volunteers explicitly state what they expect of each other and establish mechanisms to check in on or verify fulfillment of promises. Such agreements can add transparency, consistency, predictability, and longevity to relationships. They are not rules or mandates in themselves, but they clarify and support program relationships and the expectations of all involved in them.

While accountability is important, structuring it can be difficult. Some programs initiate accountability agreements for the entire group. In others, two peers might make informal agreements to hold each other accountable, or a participant and a community member may do so.

Be Aware of Participants’ Past Experiences

It is important to recognize that participants may be vulnerable due to a history of broken commitments from institutions or individuals close to them, so meeting expectations on the program side is especially important to building trust.

Build in Flexibility

The type of relationship that would most benefit a participant may vary from person to person. Building flexibility into agreements allows relationships to best meet the needs of individual participants upon program entry and over time. This can help to ensure that agreements are an asset rather than a burden. One way to think about this is to develop an agreement that provides guidelines for the relationship. This accountability structure is not intended to mandate what interactions look like, just to clarify expectations.

How accountability builds . . .

Bonding social capital: A feeling of accountability enhances the interpersonal confidence and trust individuals need to work together. Organizations can foster this accountability by encouraging participants to connect with each other through explicit agreements or commitments. Doing so also builds positive reciprocal relationships and cements bonding social capital.

Bridging social capital: Individual social capital can be built through accountability structures between two or more people in a bridging social capital relationship. An excellent example is a mentoring relationship, in which participants are expected to communicate and connect with each other, give and seek advice, and respect alternative views.

Emerging Practices in Action

Circles of Support and Accountability pairs volunteers with formerly incarcerated individuals (known as *core members*) to help them adjust to life after release from prison. These volunteers establish relationships with core members that are based on mutuality, equality, and an agreement (or “covenant”) to work toward creating lasting and responsible friendships, free of risk for further harmful conduct.

Open Table is a national nonprofit organization that trains members of faith communities, businesses, health care systems, and other entities to invest in social capital building with members of their communities with complex needs. In the Open Table model, volunteers make a year-long commitment to a reciprocal relationship with an individual or family to help that individual or family improve health and economic outcomes. These volunteers provide encouragement, assistance with life skills, and connections to social capital in the community. Program volunteers and participants create a mutually acceptable “after plan,” which formalizes a commitment to sustain the relationships and social capital networks created.

Manager’s Worksheet:

Emphasizing Accountability

Although the preceding page includes information on how programs have addressed social capital, there are no “right” answers as to what approaches to use or how to implement them. You and your partners can use this worksheet, combined with knowledge of your program’s characteristics, to explore whether or how to adopt or expand this practice to improve individual outcomes.

To what extent might an emphasis on accountability among participants and other stakeholders help strengthen progress toward program outcomes?

If you think an accountability agreement is right for your program, consider what you would want it to include. Often programs write agreement templates with spaces to enter any relevant names, dates, and signatures. Items to consider incorporating may include relationship goals, minimum program commitments and responsibilities, norms for interaction, a timeline with end or renewal dates, and confidentiality expectations and limitations. For example, a mentoring program may consider including something like the following as part of its template:

This is an agreement between _____ and _____. Our goal as a mentoring pair is to support _____ in achieving their career, education, and well-being goals. We agree to form a two-way relationship, where each participant is valued and is able to contribute to the relationship. We will prioritize building trust and maintaining an open, honest relationship. We agree to meet _____ for at least _____, after which time we will mutually consider whether to extend our commitment. If we opt to communicate outside of regular in-person meetings, we prefer to communicate via _____. We commit to holding any information shared between us as confidential and private, except in cases where the safety of an individual is at risk.

Agreement Topic	Relevant Text to Include in Agreement
Goal(s) of relationship	
Roles and responsibilities for each person	
Commitments by each person	
Other topics as needed	
Other topics as needed	