What Works Collaborative

Assessment Report

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... 6
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... 7
Executive Summary ...................................................................................................................... 8
  Benefits ....................................................................................................................................... 8
  Influence ..................................................................................................................................... 9
  Challenges: Tensions and Tradeoffs ........................................................................................... 9
  Lessons ...................................................................................................................................... 11
Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 12
  Background ................................................................................................................................ 12
  Assessment Methodology and Analysis ................................................................................... 12
Results .......................................................................................................................................... 14
  Summary of Goal Achievement ................................................................................................ 14
  What Works Collaborative: ...................................................................................................... 15
  Influence of WWC on HUD: Lasting Impact? ......................................................................... 20
  Challenges: Tensions and Tradeoffs ......................................................................................... 22
  Lessons Learned and Future Considerations ............................................................................ 29
Concluding Observations ........................................................................................................... 31
Appendix A: WWC Reports .................................................................................................... A-1
Appendix B: Interviewees ........................................................................................................ A-2
Appendix C: Interview Guide .................................................................................................. A-5
References .................................................................................................................................. A-7
Executive Summary

The What Works Collaborative (WWC) is a foundation-supported partnership of researchers, policymakers, and funders that conducts timely research and analysis to help inform the implementation of evidence-based housing and urban policy. It was created in 2008 as the housing crisis was unfolding and a new US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administration was taking over and needed to build knowledge and analyze policy solutions. During its first two years (2008–2010) of operations, or Phase 1, the WWC conducted 25 independent research projects that focused on HUD’s strategic goals. During the next two years (2010–2012), Phase 2, the WWC addressed broader research questions and helped to identify and conceptualize a research agenda for the housing and urban development field. Phase 3 of the project began in 2012 and included the implementation of incubator studies that are targeted for completion in summer 2013.

This independent assessment of the WWC was conducted in the summer and fall of 2012 and focused on determining the benefits, the challenges, and the influence of the WWC. The assessment included 21, one-hour, key informant interviews with WWC participants. Respondents were questioned about the management of the collaborative and research development processes, the efficiency of the collaborative model, the overall quality and relevance of the research, and the dissemination strategies.

It was clear from these interviews that respondents felt WWC had met its articulated goals of providing the Secretary of HUD with quick turnaround policy analysis and rigorous research to inform the next generation of HUD policy. WWC conducted and published research projects focusing on HUD’s priorities. The Collaborative also completed a set of framing papers that helped inform the development of HUD’s five year research plan, and began a set of incubator studies that may provide the pilot work for larger, more comprehensive research. The incubator studies have yet to be completed, so final conclusions on their importance cannot be drawn. However, everyone could readily identify several types of benefits that accrued from participating in the WWC.

Benefits

By far, the benefit most often cited by WWC participants was the opportunity to support and inform a new administration while it dealt with the urgency of a housing crisis. HUD’s in-house research capacity was underfunded and underperforming and HUD faced real challenges in making new policies or reforming older policies without access to the most current knowledge. WWC members stepped in to provide the needed research and, by all accounts, are very proud of the opportunity to assist.

Another benefit was the opportunity to align and coordinate research agendas. WWC participants saw great benefit in being around the same table to explore the state of
knowledge and its gaps and the type of research being supported. Likewise, the WWC participants found benefits in strengthening professional ties and improving communication between their organizations. These strong relationships provided a valuable opportunity for participants to engage in conversations marked by honesty and candor. Many identified this as an opportunity to participate in high quality education. All participants learned more about how the other institutions and professionals think about complex problems, what expectations they have for research, and what they assume public policy formulation can deliver. These learning opportunities were expanded as WWC moved into Phase 2 when mid-level HUD staff came to observe the discussions and review the papers. The benefits of this type of HUD staff development cannot easily be measured.

Perhaps one of the lasting benefits of WWC will be the opportunity that participants had to engage in unusual ways of working and thinking together. These benefits did not just happen but, in part, resulted from the practice of pooled funding, creating equitable operating protocols, and the use of strong collaborative leadership approaches. Respondents reported that working together provided them with “cover” to work on projects and in areas not a primary focus within their organizations. Several interviewees mentioned expanding their ideas and gaining new insights. These benefits were widely shared by participants and as several mentioned, “They voted with their feet” as they continued to participate.

Influence
According to HUD leadership, the work of the WWC had the opportunity to influence HUD in three key areas: to inform policies by providing short term, quick research and analysis; to expand HUD’s research capacity while the in-house department was being revitalized; and to inform HUD leadership on potential institution building reforms. Much of this work was done through formal reports, but HUD did speak of the value of less formal work that provided a direct line to many experts. Two substantial areas of influence should be noted: First, HUD wanted cooperative agreement reforms so that they could more easily enter into partnerships. HUD staff used the experience of working with the WWC to demonstrate the importance of this agreement and eventually obtained the authority. Second, the set of framing papers developed by WWC was critical to the development of the HUD Research Roadmap project. The framing papers provided the background for the key studies and areas of inquiry outlined in the Research Roadmap. Any influence of the Phase 3 WWC incubator studies on the HUD research agenda will be part of discussion during the coming year, however, the inclusion of the framing papers in the development of the HUD research agenda speaks to the quality and importance of these documents and suggests real possibilities for continued influence of the incubator studies.

Challenges: Tensions and Tradeoffs
Despite the agreed-upon benefits and the identified influence of the WWC, there were the inevitable tensions and tradeoffs. The WWC respondents reported seven different types of challenges, tensions, and tradeoffs inherent in the collaboration. They included challenges related to mission clarity, research demands, openness, perception of
conflict of interests and legislative limits, administrative procedures, collaborative processes, and sustainability concerns.

There is widespread agreement that Phase 1 of the WWC effort was successful at providing valuable, relevant research to HUD. All partners report a clear understanding of this initial purpose, however, as the project evolved the clarity of purpose eroded. As the WWC moved into Phase 2, participants reported greater frustration with the process and a general lack of understanding about what WWC was trying to accomplish.

Two aspects of the research enterprise were identified as challenging and required some uncomfortable tradeoffs. The first was the speed at which the research reports were needed and the desire for more time for peer review and other quality controls. The second tradeoff was related to the scale of the studies, given the available funding. Most respondents voiced some frustration over the scope of the incubator studies, while recognizing that the work is still in process.

One of the most frequently cited challenges was associated with the limitations of having a small set of researchers and no specific practitioners participating in the WWC process. Geographic diversity, ethnicity and racial diversity, and practitioner wisdom were perspectives that WWC felt were needed, however, they observed that the speed required to respond to HUD’s immediate needs prevented casting a broader net for input.

The WWC exposed the realities of a governmental body with legislative constraints related to cooperative agreements and appearances of conflict of interests. HUD staff must be mindful of future contracting opportunities and not show any vendor favoritism. Research institutions must be careful not to get disqualified from competition by receiving early funding information. Funders must avoid the appearance of lobbying. These challenges had to be managed and the WWC established transparency protocols early on to help with these risks.

Although most respondents reported that Urban Institute did a superb job in managing the contracting and meeting aspects of the WWC, problems did exist. Some topics that were mentioned include creating timely systems to administer contracts, managing the complexity of research development, and re-granting the funds. Likewise, several respondents mentioned the time-consuming and process-heavy aspect of the meetings, as well as collaboration challenges. Finally, questions arose as to whether or not the use of evidence would become an institutionalized aspect of policymaking or survive the tenure of this leadership. Finding ways to institutionalize and maintain analytical capacity and data driven decisionmaking within federal agencies continue to be important to WWC. HUD has worked to address these needs in “structural ways.” WWC, like most other collaborative efforts, had its share of challenges, tensions, and tradeoffs. These challenges did not stop WWC from working, but they did enter into the perspectives of the members and should be considered in future efforts.
Lessons
Participants reflected upon several lessons learned or relearned in the WWC process that can be instructive for future work.

1. Emphasize the value of clear purpose and agreed-upon success measures. This simple principle could help alleviate some of the frustration members felt in Phase 2 and will be central to determine if there is a future effort.
2. Demand driven research or connecting researchers, funders, and end users makes for a more useful product.
3. Realize the invaluable contribution of crisis and trust. The WWC emerged to address urgent needs of a particular time and was embodied in long standing relationships. It is unclear how much of this can be replicated.
4. Expand perspectives and infuse new thinking. The value of good conversations about complex topics with well-informed participants should not be underestimated.
5. Be realistic about the time it takes to do quality research and the tradeoffs of limiting involvement. These realities need to be recognized upfront and efforts to manage them should be considered.
6. Recognize and improve the policymaking process. There was broad recognition that policies are often developed without the benefit of research, that even the most relevant policy research often lacks the communication strategies that help policymakers make the connection between knowledge and policy.

This qualitative assessment makes clear that WWC was effective at meeting all of the initial project goals and provided participants with multiple benefits. The research partners were exemplary. The funders were flexible and committed, and the policymakers were direct and involved. It is also clear that the urgency of the time and the history of the players were critical to making the WWC possible. Several lessons emerged that should be considered as future collaborative work is explored.
Introduction

Background
The What Works Collaborative (WWC) is a foundation-supported partnership that conducts timely research and analysis to help inform the implementation of an evidence-based housing and urban policy agenda. It was created in 2008 to build knowledge and share solutions with policymakers at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). During its first two years (2008–2010) of operations, or Phase 1, the WWC undertook 25 independent research projects (listed in Appendix A) that focused on HUD’s strategic goals.

During the next two years (2010–2012) of the project, or Phase 2, the WWC addressed broader questions for policy research and worked to help identify and conceptualize a research agenda for the field. Specifically, WWC commissioned and published five comprehensive framing papers in Phase 2 that highlight what is known and remaining gaps in knowledge for these research areas. The papers were the focus of several meetings convened to gain input from larger stakeholder groups and reflect the best thinking of expert researchers, practitioners, funders, and policymakers in the field. The framing papers informed the development of several incubator studies, Phase 3, that are currently being conducted by the WWC partners. Results from these projects are expected in summer 2013.

Assessment Methodology and Analysis
This independent assessment of the WWC was conducted in the summer and fall of 2012. It focused on determining the extent to which the WWC had met its articulated goals, and on discerning what lessons were learned over the past four years that might be useful in structuring ongoing collaborative work.

The assessment included 21 key informant interviews with funders, policymakers, and researchers (Appendix B) who had participated in the WWC. Each interview, which took about one hour, was recorded and transcribed. Interviews followed a set of questions (Appendix C) designed to identify the benefits of participating in WWC, the challenges that members experienced, and ways WWC research influenced policymaking. Respondents were questioned about the management of the Collaborative and the research development processes, the efficiency of the Collaborative model, the overall quality of the research, and the dissemination strategies.

The interview transcripts were reviewed and ideas identified by the majority of respondents were cataloged and included in this analysis. Although each sector (funders, policymakers, and researchers) had a little different take on the workings and impact of the WWC, this analysis treats them as a single entity—members of the Collaborative. The quotes used in this analysis are representative statements of the participant interviews. It should be noted that many respondents remarked that
significant time has passed since they were involved and expressed some concern about the accuracy and totality of their recall.
Results

What follows is a brief summary of respondents’ views on the extent to which the WWC met its stated goals. The next three sections will provide a more in-depth look at the specific benefits of the collaboration, an outline of how the work influenced HUD and its leadership, and challenges reported by participants. The final section highlights lessons learned from the WWC process. Concluding observations end the report.

Summary of Goal Achievement
Specific WWC goals were as follows:

1. Provide the Secretary of HUD with quick turnaround policy analysis and rigorous research that informs the development of the next generation of the US housing and urban policy.

The assessment asked respondents to reflect upon how well the Collaborative had accomplished its goal of providing HUD with timely, relevant analysis. There was universal agreement that WWC provided HUD with the information and research needed to inform policy discussions and decisionmaking during its first two years of operation. For the most part, the majority of the studies were seen as informative and mentioned useful and numerous examples of how these analyses informed specific areas of HUD’s policy interests.

There was also widespread recognition that the early work in Phase 1 was driven by a deep sense of urgency and that conversations and conclusions, while substantive and useful, included fewer people and were less structured than those that followed in Phase 2.

2. Hold convenings, launch research projects that focus on HUD’s priorities, and publish results.

WWC reportedly completed these tasks, however, some concerns were expressed. Members recognize the limits of their small stakeholders group and acknowledge that broader perspectives from more diverse stakeholders are needed. WWC convenings helped to address this concern by expanding the conversation to include a broader set of inputs during the development of the framing papers in Phase 2.

These papers were distributed through housing researcher networks and placed on a specific Urban Institute (UI) WWC Web site, mentioned in the UI newsletter, and some were published in Cityscape, HUD’s journal of policy development and research. No identifiable marketing or push strategy has been undertaken and promotion of the research remains within a small circle of researchers. This is understandable for Phase 1 reports as HUD leadership was the primary audience for that work, however, the white papers and incubator study reports could appeal to broader constituencies.
3. Produce a set of framing papers for broad areas of housing and urban policy research.

Five papers resulting from the Phase 2 process were produced to provide direction and priorities for field research to inform housing and urban development policy in the future. These reports were published as a way to broaden the base of support for the research agenda. Concurrently, HUD began conducting a comprehensive, in-depth review process to guide the development of a long-term research agenda for the agency. The WWC papers were used as input to the development of HUD’s five-year research plan, slated for early 2013 publication.

4. Develop a medium-to-long-term policy research agenda for the housing and urban policy field.

WWC members report that the goal of developing a medium-to-long-term policy research agenda for the housing and urban policy field is a work in progress. The WWC framing papers provided the basis for nine incubator studies in Phase 3 that are currently being conducted. WWC used a consensus process with groups of experts to frame the state of research in several key areas of housing and urban policy. The incubator studies may provide the pilot work for larger, more comprehensive research, but it is too early to know.

These results clearly show that respondents felt the WWC had met its articulated goals. They provided the needed quick response research and began making a contribution to a longer term knowledge building effort. All respondents are waiting to see how the development of the future field building research will be concluded. The identified benefits of participating in the WWC outlined in the next section offer a few reasons to be optimistic about this outcome.

What Works Collaborative: Benefits

All respondents readily named five different types of benefits that accrued from participating in the WWC. They include the opportunity to support HUD, the chance to coordinate research agendas, a chance to learn from and educate colleagues, an opportunity to improve professional ties and communications among organizations, and the chance to try new practice ideas.

Often the perceived benefits reflect the perspective the interviewee brought into the Collaborative. Funders were generally appreciative of the opportunity to participate in policy conversations with top federal leaders in a field of philanthropic interest. They reported a high level of appreciation for the invitation to collaborate with sister institutions, and the learning that ensued from strategic discussions on the knowledge gaps that could help shape future funding decisions.

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1 For the purposes of the WWC assessment, benefits were defined as rewards that were perceived as “value added” to either the individual, the institution worked with, or the missions in pursuit.
Researchers appreciated the opportunity to share knowledge with policy leaders and funders who might work together to construct a shared overview of the field, and the likelihood that their research would find a shortcut into the policy formulation process.

Newly appointed federal officials, whose urgent needs were the original purpose of the initiative, welcomed the quick turnaround research and the engagement with housing and urban scholars. They valued the additional intellectual resources that gave them time to rebuild the capacity of the neglected research arm of HUD, and input relevant to reforming the agency’s overall organization and structure.

1. The opportunity to contribute to HUD and its effectiveness

By far, the benefit most often cited by WWC participants was the urgency of the moment and the opportunity it created to support and inform a new administration at HUD as it transitioned into leadership. This opportunity seemed particularly important and compelling against a backdrop of a national financial and housing crisis.

“It was a moment of revitalization and reinvention in the agency that benefits the poor and the vulnerable in the US.”

“It was an important venue and important things were aired and brought to the attention of people who were going to have the ability to do these things in the future.”

“[WWC presented] the opportunity of reawakening HUD and being able to really make it relevant again, and to find ways to align HUD’s research and other capacities with the field.”

After eight years of disinterest and neglect, the Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R), HUD’s in-house research capacity, was underfunded and underperforming. HUD faced real challenges in making new policy or reforming older policies without access to the current knowledge base in the fields of urban policy and housing. Given that top policy leadership within HUD could both formulate strategic need-to-know questions and influence subsequent policy development, the opportunity to help shape the public policies that this new HUD administration would formulate and propose was significant.

“The input allowed for more informed, more sophisticated, better rounded thinking about particular issues. [The Collaborative] was a vehicle for amplifying some of the things that [HUD] had been trying to say all along.”

“HUD didn’t have resources to pursue those projects and get the answers to what’s going on. This supplemental resource allowed for some progress and advancement in some areas that probably wouldn’t have moved forward absent the Collaborative.”
A collective commitment to institution building—the sense of urgency that surrounded the new administration and its opportunities to impact areas of critical importance—animated all the early work of the WWC and engaged the time and serious attention of all participants.

2. The potential to align and coordinate high quality research agendas

Whether a producer, consumer, or funder of research, WWC participants saw great benefit in being around the same table to explore the state of knowledge in the fields of urban development and housing and to identify gaps in knowledge.

“The process got us to what are the most timely and relevant research questions that are feasible to pursue, that would really advance the field understanding about whatever issue, and could really help us understand what more, with additional investment, we could learn.”

The assumption was that this collective effort would result in (1) a broader understanding of where the gaps in knowledge were and what research needed to be undertaken, (2) a productive synergy between various research projects, (3) a diminution of project overlap and redundancy leading to better targeting of funding resources, and (4) the formulation of better research questions.

“This type of independent Collaborative that is connected to -- but independent of—a federal agency provides an opportunity to produce research that isn’t shrouded in all the political.”

“All foundations are looking for that white space of where the foundation can play a role that’s unique and not duplicative of what others are doing.”

3. Strengthening professional ties and improving communication

It is clear that there were two parents of the WWC: crisis and trust. The first was the larger housing and financial crisis that loomed as the new Obama administration came to office. The latter was born out of shared expertise and prior working relationships among Collaborative members. Most of the major foundations had worked together previously, their staffs knew each other personally or knew of each other’s work, and most had worked with Secretary Donovan when he was Commissioner of Housing for NYC. Most of the funders also had deep regret that a high quality research capacity had been lost from HUD, and great respect for the capacity of the WWC research partners. A few of the funders who participated had been researchers themselves before entering philanthropy, and most regularly fund academic research as part of their program portfolios. The researchers knew and respected the Secretary’s work and each other, some worked on President Obama’s transition team, and most had grantee relationships with the participating national funders. And finally, many of the top
leadership brought into HUD only deepened the network of past relationships as some were researchers and a few came to Washington from foundation grant-making backgrounds.

While perceived by some as a small and perhaps closed network of relationships, the WWC nonetheless provided a valuable opportunity for its deeply informed participants to engage in conversations marked by honesty and candor. This collective sense of trust and respect contributed to the value of the experience for all collaborators, and was recognized as significant to deepening professional relationships among individuals and institutions.

“One of the things it did was got some of the key players in the housing research field together to really talk in some depth about some thorny issues that we all knew about and even to talk a bit about what we could learn through research and what we couldn’t.”

“The Collaborative does provide a candid networking space for the stakeholders. It does create a really productive forum for exchange of information.”

“The exercise itself was worth doing, being able to forge effective working relationships between philanthropy and HUD is probably a good thing for everybody in the long run.”

4. Providing high quality education to participants

Given the quality of the research institutions that participated in the WWC, the deep commitment of the participating funders to the fields of housing and urban policy, and the caliber of the federal leadership team that was assembled by the new administration, it is not surprising that most participants talked about the learning and educational benefit of participating. All participants learned more about how the other institutions and professionals think about complex problems, what expectations they have for research, and what they assume public policy formation can deliver. Even those participants who had deep expertise in research and the fields of housing and urban policy said that the conversations opened up productive lines of inquiry and provided some unique insights.

“The most successful part was giving the partners in the Collaborative a richer sense of how the policymakers think about these problems and issues, and which [questions] were important from a policymaking perspective, as opposed to from an analytical academic perspective.”

“We essentially bought ourselves a seat at the table with really smart people who are thinking expansively about the critical challenges in housing policy. In some ways that for us was a much richer engagement
than anything we could do by bringing on a consultant....and we get to support the development of a policy-oriented research agenda.”

HUD benefited from quick access to what is known across a broad range of relevant topics. And by the time the Collaborative moved into Phase 2, midlevel career staff from the agency were observing discussions, reading published reports, and benefiting from high quality professional development opportunities. The agency’s leadership also thought that participation provided HUD visibility within an important community.

“The Collaborative has been very helpful establishing the credibility of PD&R and of HUD as a partner in doing thoughtful research and policy development.”

Funders and researchers gained a new appreciation for the challenging context in which federal policy is formulated and the variable relationship policy development can have with deep academic analysis of problems and past programs. They also gained a deep appreciation for the many limits and constraints even the most reform-minded leadership faces when new political appointees arrive to manage a huge, complicated bureaucracy staffed by thousands of career employees.

5. Experimenting with new practices/perspectives

Perhaps one of the lasting benefits of WWC will be the opportunity that participants had to engage in unusual ways of working and thinking together. These benefits did not just happen but, in part, resulted from the practice of pooled funding, creating equitable operating protocols (one vote per organization), and use of strong collaborative leadership approaches. Brought together by a crisis and the ensuing sense of urgency, all participants were able to step out of old roles and habits. This new positioning allowed them to experiment with new ways of relating to those who shared similar interests, if not somewhat different perspectives. They experienced a reduced risk of participation, of asking new questions, or of challenging conventional ways to relate to each other or to the work at hand. Likewise, respondents reported that working together provided them with “cover” to work on projects and in areas not a primary focus within their organizations. Several interviewees mentioned expanding their ideas and gaining new insights or refined perspectives on old challenges that grew directly out of participating in the WWC opportunity.

“Maybe it is a crisis that helps foundation learn to work with each other better.”

“Some of the most important things happen when you take people who wouldn’t ordinarily all be in a room and put them together, and you can have really interesting and insightful conversation.”
“The power dynamics are different in a collaborative of funders and policymakers than it is of funders and nonprofits or research organizations that are looking for money.”

“It’s a more efficient way to surface shared issues and opportunities for collaboration...this is model for ways in which philanthropy can work with federal agencies that maximizes our impact and is an efficient use of our time.”

“The thing that we gained that we couldn’t have gotten on our own was the real good faith participation in some of these things by other funders.”

“It’s made us more comfortable with the idea that there is a way to structure a role for philanthropy that can be helpful to federal agencies.”

In summary, it was clear from all respondents that participating in WWC had been beneficial in numerous ways. It appealed to their desire to address the national housing crisis. It provided them with opportunities to expand and fine-tune intellectual muscles. It gave them an opportunity to strengthen professional and organizational relationships. Finally, they were able to operationalize equitable practices of pooling funds and democratically and collaboratively develop analytical approaches. As many respondents said, they voted with their feet. They continued to be involved despite the challenges inherent in the collaboration process.

Influence of WWC on HUD: Lasting Impact?

According to HUD leadership, the work of the WWC had the opportunity to influence HUD in three key areas: to inform policies by providing short term, quick response intelligence at a critical moment in time; to expand HUD’s overall research capacity while the agency’s PD&R office was being revitalized; and to help inform the HUD leadership’s work toward institution building and reform.

Participants allowed that a specific policy decision is the result of a diverse set of considerations. However, HUD staff cited several specific early WWC research topics as having been particularly influential, including work on housing finance reform, rental markets, suburban capacity, neighborhood sustainability, and low income tax credits. These were in a few cases requested by senior staff with direct responsibility for developing policy in the related areas, which resulted in Congressional testimonies, conversations with other federal agencies, convening (in one instance at the White House), and publication in HUD’s journal Cityscape and as chapters in academic books.

“[Some papers] have definitely added in significant ways to the information set that is shaping how we think about the issues and thinking about what kind of projects we should do; what kind of decisions we should be making.”
“A lot of early projects were put into use in the development of the Rental Assistance Demonstration Program...These were the projects in particular having to do with resident choice, voucher programs, or mobility assistance.”

“Work on revitalizing distressed older suburbs was something we paid a lot of attention to in the development of our Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative.”

HUD staff also spoke of the real value of less formal work:

“Some of the most useful products were frankly the memos, based on some reviews of research that were quick, and followed up by a conversation that fed into policy deliberations that [HUD was] having in the moment.”

Establishing or documenting a direct relationship between any WWC research and specific policy development is beyond the design of this assessment, however, the value that the Collaborative provided in informing thinking, in providing an opportunity to develop a sense of “collective wisdom and our collective understanding of things” should not be underestimated. While hard to document explicit project influence on policy decisions, these research projects and subsequent conversations proved critical to those who were responsible for shaping policy:

“In a sense, it’s an organic influence that it’s hard to tie to a particular project....This stuff came in a timely way to a set of people who were thinking hard about these things so I think it was really helpful.”

“The influence on policy of research is always a sticky question because it’s not like you produce a report and lawmakers say, ‘My God, I never saw it this way before and let’s change the law.’”

The Collaborative also offered the opportunity to influence structural reform of the agency. HUD’s ongoing participation in the WWC was increasingly encumbered by rules and regulations that put the agency’s behaviors under scrutiny. Although such requirements put major stresses on HUD’s staff leadership, they also triggered efforts to reform those requirements that impeded partnership and funding of timely research opportunities. Using the experience of the WWC and past partnerships as illustration, the PD&R staff successfully changed the law to allow HUD to participate in unsolicited funding partnerships in the future.

“We knew that we wanted that authority and we used the experience of the What Works Collaborative to demonstrate its importance.”

Despite these many benefits, several tensions and tradeoffs were evident.
Challenges: Tensions and Tradeoffs

Inherent in any collaborative enterprise are the tensions and tradeoffs necessary to working in a democratic group and working toward consensus decisions. These tensions are inevitable, and, in fact, may indicate a highly effective collaboration. The WWC respondents identified seven different types of challenges, tensions, and tradeoffs that they experienced while participating in the WWC. These included challenges related to mission clarity, research demands, openness, perception of conflict of interests and legislative limits, administrative procedures, collaborative processes, and sustainability concerns.

1. Clarity of mission

There is widespread agreement that Phase I of the WWC effort was successful at providing valuable, relevant analytic reports to the new HUD administration for informing and expanding policy choices. All partners report a clear understanding of this initial purpose, however, as the project evolved this clarity of purpose was eroded. As the project moved into Phase 2 and the design of white papers and incubator studies, participants report greater frustration with the process and a general lack of understanding about what WWC was trying to accomplish. One funder remarked that funders made the cardinal funding mistake and “led with the money” rather than with a clear objective accompanied by an articulated exit plan. This lack of clarity made it difficult to frame the Phase 2 efforts.

“You create a process and it becomes very difficult to gauge where it’s going to go. You have less influence on its outcome...people need to understand what their expectations are of research. Make sure that you’re really in agreement on this. [The WWC] creates a much less clear process for doing that.”

“It feels like those very fundamental questions, we don’t have all that satisfying answers to. It feels like we need to come back together and say, ‘Okay, forget about eight projects or whatever. Let’s just talk about what’s the one thing that has to be done and what’s the best way of doing it.’”

“...it became less cohesive, and I think that’s reflected in the disparities between the white papers.”

“When [WWC] was first established, there was a large urgency to help HUD. As more and more time passed, the focus really started to go to how do we help our individual organizations...I think it’s made it a bit more difficult to come to consensus on which projects should be pursued...”

“Again there’s tradeoffs when you design a structure between seeing how everything is going to work ahead of time and allowing for a
certain amount of evolution in the structure and the operations of the institution. We spent a lot of time figuring out what we should do next, meaning are we going to have another round. Do people think it’s valuable enough to keep meeting? In fact, it was first designed with pretty strong clarity that it was going to be a limited term, with a sense of what its purpose was… but everybody liked meeting together so much and they were getting so much… ‘okay, let’s keep meeting.’ ”

2. Research demands

“I’d say doing very quick turnaround work isn’t totally in our DNA…”

Two aspects of the research enterprise were mentioned as challenging by most of the respondents. The first was related to the urgency or speed at which the research reports were needed and the desire for more time for peer review and other quality controls. The second challenge was related to the scale of the studies, the level of the analysis, and the available funding.

Although the initial design of the WWC was to provide rapid response policy analysis, the realities of the research enterprise and the time required for thoughtful, thorough analysis created tension. Researchers reported wanting more time for analysis and peer review, while HUD had to deal with the daily demands of a dynamic and fast changing housing market and policy environment. For these studies to be relevant, they had to be timely. Participants reported receiving calls from HUD requesting to see work that was in early draft phases. Researchers reported concern that report quality did not reflect the standards of their esteemed organizations.

As the WWC moved into Phase 3, concerns about the feasible scale of the studies given the available resources emerged. Most respondents voiced some frustration over the scope of the incubator studies, while recognizing that the work is still in process so their potential impact or influence on future research is yet to be determined. As one respondent remarked, “the game is still afoot.”

“The incubator piece… is one that I think was more challenging if you really want to marshal your resources and get the biggest bang for your buck. Dividing it up into a lot of little pots, is not going to result in the biggest bang… maybe a lot of little pops.”

“I think there has to be an understanding of the pace at which research organizations do things as opposed to consulting firms.”

“In hindsight, I think again, some of this tension between high quality and quick turnaround, could have been made less problematic if the branding and dissemination strategy had been a little more thoughtful from the start.”
“[There was an ongoing concern about] quality control and the association with the organization...”

“Often our interface with HUD...occurred in these highly structured settings that happen once every few months...We all know the policy calendar moves a lot faster than that....”

3. Open or closed collaborative

One of the most frequently cited challenges for the WWC was associated with the limitations of having a small set of researchers and no specific practitioners participating in the WWC process. Many were concerned that WWC participants reflected the “usual suspects” and were not open to a broader range of inputs. Geographic diversity, ethnicity and racial diversity, and practitioner wisdom were perspectives that WWC participants felt were needed, however, they observed that the speed required to respond to HUD’s needs prevented the casting of a broader net for input.

These limitations in perspective and inputs were of particular concern for HUD as they began the process of outlining the future research agenda for the agency. HUD reported that WWC “Phase 2 was intended to try to open up the kinds of people who were having input.”

“We made it clear [we were not signaling a preference]. We did not vote...we talked about the Research Roadmap process and we talked about the broader engagement.”

Recalibrating WWC for Phase 2 that focused more on the interests of participants and less on the needs of HUD seems to have resulted in less clarity of purpose, more concern about limited perspectives and the development of greater protections (i.e., less engagement) from allegations of favoritism.

“Trying to be as open and inclusive while still being fast...I understand the more inclusive you are, the harder it is to quickly deploy resources. So, there’s a tension, but it’s something that always needs to be considered and thought about.”

“We had begun to start pushing the network to include other researchers in the conversations, and to open up the research to their networks.”

“The desire to press the group to open it up to other researchers was something we had been pressing for.”
4. Perceptions of conflicts of interests: legislative limits and political partisanship

Perceptions of conflict of interests and the appearance of favoritism were of concern to all WWC participants, especially the HUD staff. The WWC exposed the realities of HUD being a governmental body with legislative constraints related to cooperative agreements and appearances of conflict of interests.

"...it was really important that [HUD] maintain a degree of arm’s length propriety so that no one could claim that there was a shadow research organization...or that...organizations had some special in with HUD that allowed them to compete more effectively."

HUD staff must be mindful of future contracting opportunities and be careful not to appear to show favoritism to any potential vendor. In fact, it was reported that the amount of time HUD staff can be in the same room with any potential contractor is regulated. Research institutions that compete for government contracts must be careful not to get disqualified from competition by receiving early information about HUD procurement opportunities. Funders must avoid the appearance of lobbying. Researchers and funders are concerned about being painted with the brush of any single (Republican or Democratic) administration that might impact possibilities for working with future presidents. These challenges had to be managed and the WWC established transparency protocols early on to help with these risks.

 Participating in the WWC Phase 2 efforts reportedly amplified the concerns about conflict of interests and favoritism. As research questions moved from focusing on immediate HUD needs and began to focus on field building research, or incubating studies to fill knowledge gaps, an implicit assumption that these studies could seed larger HUD support made it more difficult for HUD to be involved. Many participants reported a change in HUD engagement as WWC moved into Phase 2 that left them wondering about the role of the Collaborative. HUD reported a discomfort with Phase 2 work as they could not signal what would be, or if these studies would be, of interest for future HUD investments.

 During this time, HUD began the development of a Research Roadmap agenda for the agency. By HUD staff accounts that agenda setting benefited greatly from the work done in WWC Phase 2. The WWC white papers were used to inform the agenda and many of the WWC participants were involved in the HUD process. However, HUD’s process was much broader, incorporated over 950 external comments and “overall was a very, very broad in-depth kind of engagement process that went beyond just the actors in the WWC.”

 At the time of this writing, the HUD Research Roadmap is still under development and the WWC incubator studies are still being conducted. It is possible that the finished WWC studies will provide a valuable start for implementing the HUD research agenda. The WWC studies address some of the HUD priorities and the HUD agenda is built, in part, upon past WWC papers. Many of the interviewees expressed optimism that these
two efforts will be closely aligned. If that happens, an ideal model of philanthropy seeding research and federal agencies taking it to scale could be a lasting legacy for the WWC.

“....the connection between this work and the work of the emergent administration, a Democratic administration, led a lot of people to have misgivings because we’re supposed to be a nonpartisan institution.”

“There are the simple concerns about conflict of interests and not wanting to learn early about HUD procurement opportunities in a way that would require us not to compete.”

“...at least the whiff of favoritism because honestly we got a lot of face time with [HUD] people.”

“[HUD] had to follow certain kinds of rules related to who we consult with and advisory groups and decisionmaking groups, etc.”

“[HUD] did not vote on the projects...We got to a level of being uncomfortable...Part of that is a little bit of discomfort...and it gets into this whole other kind of murky area.”

“I would say [HUD] kind of held our cards close, closer in that kind of decisionmaking part.”

“It’s a tough time to do business in Washington as an agency, and just getting hammered all the time on the Hill and dealing with the crazies and so don’t fault these guys for not being able to see past next week in terms of what they need to do and what evidence they need to marshal. You need to play a lot of defense and thinking about the future of housing policy is a nice thing, but probably something that they can’t afford to spend a lot of time on...Maybe there’s just a mismatch between what we set out to do in this second phase...and what the reality is like in a place like HUD day-to-day, week-to-week, even in research.”

5. Administrative procedures

Although most respondents reported that Urban Institute did a superb job in managing the contracting and meetings aspects of WWC, nonetheless, problems did exist. Creating timely systems to administer contracts, managing the complexities of research development processes, and re-granting the funds were all mentioned as challenges experienced by WWC participants. Not only were these processes often cumbersome, but they were potentially more costly in that overhead was often paid to two organizations and multiple levels of administration required financing. However, the WWC funders did not see this as an issue.
“I think it didn’t necessarily succeed as well as it might...because the nature of...institutions in creating new systems is that we weren’t as light on our feet.”

“I just feel like the left hand didn’t know what the right hand was doing in some instances because we’d go weeks without actually getting everybody together and meeting...I just feel like we kind of did it in an old school way through one-on-one conversations and...we could have had a better handle on everything if this were managed in a kind of more 21st century way...”

“...on the challenge side I think the thing that leaps out of my mind was getting the systems in place to get the...subcontracts. All our contracts offices involved...And I think that was a challenge.”

6. Collaboration challenges

As has been mentioned, there was universal praise for the management and facilitation of the WWC. Urban Institute staff were consistently cited as superb in their abilities to manage complex processes and performing the “heavy lift” of keeping the WWC running. However, collaborations have inherent tensions and this one was no exception. Several respondents discussed the time-consuming and process-heavy aspect of the meetings. Others discussed the power dynamics of the group and mentioned that not all members were equally engaged nor equally influential. Despite these observations, there were a few ideas on alternative models that might have worked better.

“It’s very interesting in all of these phases, I think one of the under-appreciated dimensions is, what is conventional wisdom and what’s our collective wisdom and our collective understanding of things. Those dimensions are not things that people think of explicitly as influencing their decisions on a particular topic, but they’re incredibly important and critical.”

“See, the problem was the Collaborative as a working group, they were too big. There were just too many people and there were too many voices and the meetings themselves could be painful because they were just...long and you’d slog through stuff and everybody would have to talk. It was a little bit frustrating.”

“It’s always hard to find time to pay enough attention...”

“Just the whole...scheduling a meeting with these kind of people, it’s like rolling a boulder uphill and then getting them to respond to your inquiries. People have a million things to do and you have basically no leverage to force them to change their priorities, other than the value they see in [the] work...”
“...the challenge of getting a response, getting people in the room, getting people to pay attention, was probably the main one...”

This comment reflected the observations of most participants:

“Collaboration is hard. It is only worth doing when you can get a lot out of it.”

7. Sustainability challenges

Questions of whether or not the use of evidence would become an institutionalized aspect of policymaking or only survive the tenure of this leadership was a question that many WWC respondents were asking. The WWC grew out of a particular time and a particular set of conditions and provided, by all accounts, a valuable service to the country. Finding ways to institutionalize and maintain analytical capacity and data driven decisionmaking within federal agencies remains important to WWC members. Being linked to a specific administration raises concerns for maintaining these efforts over time and presents a challenge to Collaborative members. HUD has worked to address these needs in “structural ways so that we can create systems for the future.” Although no other clear solutions were identified, nonetheless, most respondents observed this as a challenge for the future.

“I think the question would be, how do you maintain [engagement]...for the foundation we lost interest because our priorities changed and so the question is how do you formalize this setup and keep the interest of funders...What do you do if the administration changes? How do you maintain this? Do we all retreat into our own cubby holes and silos and, say, wait for another opportune moment...the worry of course is to become some sort of institutionalized dinosaur of an organization, but there has to be some thinking of how to keep this alive and work.”

As outlined in this section, participating in WWC, like many other collaborative efforts, had its share of challenges, tensions, and tradeoffs. Participants reported that it was time consuming and process-heavy; research products were often rushed and varied in quality; and, the membership was limited to the “usual suspects,” undermining opportunities to gather diverse inputs. Members reported being challenged to protect the reputation of their organizations, both from perceptions of political partisanship and concerns about research quality. These challenges did not stop WWC from working, but they did enter into the perspective of members and should be considered in future efforts.
Lessons Learned and Future Considerations
Participants reflected upon several lessons learned or relearned in the WWC process that can be instructive for future work.

1. Value of clear purpose and agreed-upon success measures

The success of WWC Phase 1 can be tied to the clear sense of purpose to which all participants agreed. Phase 1 was designed to provide rapid, analytical work for HUD. The specific areas of analysis were selected by HUD and further developed by WWC members. This sense of purpose helped participants transcend their individual agendas and focus on a greater good. As work moved into Phase 2, this clarity of purpose was lost and members reported more frustration and less certainty about the collaborative efforts. The continuation of the Collaborative was agreed to more as a way to keep what had been a productive process going, and with HUD’s capacities improving and position within the Collaborative changing, institutional agendas became more prominent. Any future work should outline a clear purpose and develop consensus around how success is to be measured and what benchmarks will result in continuation or exit from the project.

2. Demand driven research

Closely aligned with a clear purpose is the importance of understanding and delivering research targeting end user requests. Much of the research that found its way into serious policy deliberations was requested by senior HUD officials with responsibility for shaping public policy in their discrete areas of authority. The direct connection between policymakers’ needs, available funding, and ready researchers was effective at increasing the utility of the work and should be considered in future collaborations.

3. Invaluable contribution of crisis and trust

The WWC emerged to address urgent needs of a particular time and was embodied in longstanding professional and personal relationships. Clearly this shared sense of urgency at HUD, in the context of national housing and financial crises, allowed the Collaborative participants to move into an unusual working agreement and unique set of working relationships. In addition, the preexisting connections among most of the participants made it possible to trust each other, to hand over control of professional agendas, and to ease anxieties about institutional concerns. It is not clear that the high caliber of quick, collaborative work that distinguished Phase I could happen in the absence of an established history of working together. Positioning future efforts within similarly existing networks should be considered. It is unclear whether such working arrangements can only be initiated in a crisis environment.

4. Expanding perspectives and infusing new thinking

The value of good conversations about complex topics with well-informed participants should not be underestimated. They are arguably an impact in and of themselves. The
intellectual exercise of discussing broad, complex topics; reviewing multiple perspectives; and developing a collective understanding can continue to reap benefits beyond specifically designed research projects. HUD staff explicitly said that such conversations provided important range and depth to their policy work and career staff development. And most WWC members cited this expansion of perspectives as a good reason to continue the work despite the difficulty in discerning objectives and quantifying the impact.

5. Be realistic about the time it takes to do quality research and the tradeoffs of limiting involvement

WWC participants were concerned that rapid responses meant incomplete analysis. Likewise, they were concerned that the need for rapid responses dictated that only a small group of participants could be engaged. There was continual recognition that many diverse, important perspectives were often left out. These realities need to be recognized up front and efforts to manage them should be considered.

6. Recognize and improve the policymaking process

Many WWC participants recognized that public policy formation based upon evidence and research is the ideal way to craft the legislative agendas of government. However, there was also broad recognition that policies are often developed without the benefit of research, that even the most relevant policy research often lacks the communication strategies that help policymakers make the connection between the knowledge base and the rules, and that good research may have—through discussions and relationships—a positive but very indirect influence on ultimate public policy solutions. Policies ultimately may be the messy result of knowledge, experience, and politics. It is in everyone’s interest to recognize these realities, while pursuing the highest levels of understanding about urgent problems that need policy solutions, and working to refine and improve the strategies that inform and improve the policymaking process within the public sector.
Concluding Observations

This report presents the recollected details of a project that captured the attention and professional commitment of a group of highly skilled and well-respected professionals from academia, philanthropy, and public service. It is the writers’ hope that this compendium of ideas and recollections documents the experience and preserves its heuristic value both to the participants, and to those who are interested in learning from the work undertaken by the WWC. A few key aspects of this project should be highlighted for those reviewing its history.

First and foremost, what happened in the first year of the WWC allowed those who participated to occupy a very unusual working “space.” If crisis brought them into this place, their presence was sustained by the perceived opportunity and value of the work that unfolded. Even though the demands of the collaboration process are often named “challenges,” they are evidence that the work was provocative, disrupted old ways of doing business, and demanded a new set of relationships among the participants. Science observes that when different ecosystems collide, nature is in its most robust and fertile state at the places of intersection. It is possible that the uniqueness of the WWC experience provided a type of professional “collision” for funders, researchers, and policymakers that will inspire fresh and productive ways to accomplish future work together.

Second, while participants were able to name perceived benefits of this WWC process, it is likely that some significant outcomes are less easily recognized and more subtle. As practiced and perhaps more comfortable roles for both the individual participants and the institutions they represented were challenged, new questions emerged. What is the practical role of analytical research in the often messy and politically driven formation of public policies? Can the constraints placed on public leadership by dated legislation be managed creatively to allow for policy innovation? What are the consequences of funders often being outside the research and policymaking processes even though their resources and insights can be critical to work success? And are the protocols that most often define relationships among these three constituencies conducive to advancing the impact and influence that all three desire? While not overtly addressed in the WWC process, such questions remain almost as an intellectual residue of the experience and may provoke interesting reflection among the participants and their institutional sponsors going forward.

And finally, given the results of the 2012 federal election, it is important to consider what the WWC can contribute to the challenges of the second half of the Obama presidency. Although less driven by the sense of crisis that existed in 2008, the WWC might find a way to provide valuable leadership over the next four years. The unique relationships built over the last four years of the collaboration, and the learning that took place within the process, can be a valuable resource during the second half of this administration. Impressive resources remain at the heart of the collaboration: deep research and seasoned policy expertise; public and private funding at a scale that can shape the
future of public programs; and influential institutional and individual authority. The most obvious opportunity for focus in this second term is advancing HUD’s Research Roadmap and linking its vision to the resources and potential of the WWC process. It remains to be seen whether the collaborators will view this or related potential work as an effective way to work together to further HUD’s agenda.
# Appendix A: WWC Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 GSE Reform</td>
<td>Furman Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Role of Appraisals and the Housing Market</td>
<td>Furman Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Serving Hard to House Public Housing Residents</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Disruption of LIHTC</td>
<td>Harvard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Multifamily Market Conditions, Loan Performance, and Affordable Rental</td>
<td>Harvard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Why Residents Change from Project-Based Vouchers to Portable Vouchers</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Improving the Location Performance of Housing Choice Vouchers</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Mortgage Deduction</td>
<td>Urban Institute/Brookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Performance Measures for Choice Neighborhoods</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Housing Policy and Schools</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Helping Distressed, Shrinking Older Cities &quot;Right-Size&quot; Their Physical Footprint</td>
<td>Brookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Urban Policy in the Carter Administration</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Disaster Recovery and Emergency Preparedness</td>
<td>Brookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Inclusive and Sustainable Communities</td>
<td>Furman Center/Urbam Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Innovations in Greening Public and Assisted Housing</td>
<td>Brookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Retrofitting Existing Homes and Communities–Germany</td>
<td>Brookings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Transforming Raw Public Data Files for National Research and Local Policy</td>
<td>Urban Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Housing Search Literature Review</td>
<td>Martha Galvez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 University Research on Sustainable Communities</td>
<td>University of Southern California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Philanthropic Scan</td>
<td>Rebecca Riley and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Older Suburbs Typology “The Easts”</td>
<td>Cleveland State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 HUD Regulatory Changes “Quick Fixes”</td>
<td>Center for Housing Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Aligning Education and Housing Policy</td>
<td>Center for Cities and Schools–Berkeley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Weak Market and Sunbelt Cities Sustainability and Inclusivity Add-On</td>
<td>Urban Institute/Furman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Urban Manufacturing</td>
<td>Brookings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interviewees

Ana Marie Argilagos
US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Vicki Been, Ph.D.
Director
Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy
New York University

Eric S. Belsky, Ph.D.
Executive Director
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Harvard University

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Raphael Bostic, Ph.D.
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Mary Cunningham
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Shawn Escoffery
Program Director
Strong Local Economies
Surdna Foundation

Solomon Greene
Senior Program Officer
US Programs
Open Society Institute
Cynthia Guy, Ph.D.
Associate Director for Policy Research
Annie E. Casey Foundation

Chris Herbert, Ph.D.
Director of Research
Joint Center for Housing Studies
Harvard University

Ianna Kachoris
Program Officer
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Bruce Katz
Vice President and Founding Director
Metropolitan Policy Program
Brookings Institution

George McCarthy
Director
Metropolitan Opportunity
Ford Foundation

Benjamin de la Pena
Associate Director for Urban Development
Rockefeller Foundation

Rolf Pendall
Director
Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center
Urban Institution

Erika Poethig
Acting Assistant Secretary
Office of Policy Development and Research
US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Stewart Sarkozy-Banoczy
Director
Office for International and Philanthropic Innovation
US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Luke Tate
White House Domestic Policy Council
Laura Trudeau
Senior Program Director of Detroit and Community Development
Kresge Foundation

Margery Turner, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research
Urban Institute
Appendix C: Interview Guide

What Works Collaborative Assessment
Interview Guide

Hello I’m [insert name]. I am working as a contractor to the Urban Institute to complete an independent assessment of the What Works Collaborative. Thank you for agreeing to speak with us about the What Works Collaborative.

We are interested in your views about the effectiveness and impact of the What Works Collaborative and will be asking a set of questions concerning the Collaborative start-up, the initial set of studies, the work to develop a long-term research agenda for HUD, and the current incubator studies.

This assessment has been supported by the funders of the WWC to help understand the value of the Collaborative, what has worked well to inform policy and what remains to be addressed.

The information you provide today will be included in a final report that describes WWC outcomes.

Please feel free to be candid today. Your name will not be linked with anything you say; though we will provide a list of the people we interviewed in the appendix of the report.

May we have your permission to tape record this interview?

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Questions concerning involvement/role in WWC:

1. How did your organization get involved with the What Works Collaborative (WWC)? What did you hope to accomplish by this involvement?

2. Can you describe your past and present participation in the WWC collaboration? What worked well for your organization? What was challenging for your organization?

How would you assess the efficiency of the WWC structure?

3. What did you accomplish by participating in the What Works Collaborative that you could not have done otherwise?
4. Will this experience change the way you work in the future? If so, how? (Probe HUD: How did this project influence your work? Funders: How did your involvement in WWC influence your future funding decisions?)

Assessment of collaboration, management of research process, relevance of research questions, rigor or quality of research, scope of dissemination, and impact on policy:

5. As you reflect back on your experience with the WWC, what do you think was the most successful part of the collaboration? What was the most challenging?

6. What do you think was the most successful part of the management of the research process and pooled funding? What was the most challenging?

7. Can you describe your participation in the research projects commissioned by the WWC? How would you assess the relevance of the research questions pursued? Assess the quality of the research studies?

8. What do you think was the most successful part of the research process and products? What was the most challenging?

9. What are your observations about how the research agendas were developed?

10. Can you provide examples of how the WWC has influenced decisionmaking at HUD, your organization, and in the field? Examples of how it has influenced practice, policy, and funding?

11. Can you describe and assess the WWC research report dissemination approach? What has been the "reach" of these reports?

12. As initially conceptualized, the WWC was developed to fill a gap in policy research capacity for HUD. How well has that gap been filled?

13. How familiar are you with the current incubator studies being conducted by WWC researchers? What is your opinion/assessment of the potential for these studies to fill an important research gap in urban policy?

14. What additional advice or suggestions do you have for the researchers, the policymakers, and the funders involved in the WWC?

15. Is there anything that we should have asked about that we did not?
References

