Q-Interview: Marty Alvarado and Joel Vargas discuss the development of Systems Leadership in The James Irvine Foundation's Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence initiative

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Welcome to The Q—an interview series where we invite the Equal Measure team, clients, and colleagues from the field, to share their insights on evaluation, philanthropic services, emerging trends in the social sector, and more. In this interview, we sat down with _Jobs for the Future's_ (JFF) Marty Alvarado and Joel Vargas to discuss the development of systems leadership in _The James Irvine Foundation's Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence_ initiative. JFF is the intermediary and technical assistance provider for the four Hubs grantees in California; East Bay, San Bernardino, Long Beach, and Tulare-Kings. _Equal Measure_, _Harder+Company_, and _Engage R&D_ serve as the evaluators of this initiative.

As director of learning communities and a member of the Pathways to Prosperity team at JFF, Marty Alvarado provides support to regions scaling up Linked Learning and to California Career Pathways Trust grantees. As vice president, Joel Vargas leads the work of JFF's High School Through College team. He also advises on state policies to promote improved high school and postsecondary success for underserved students.

How would you describe Jobs for the Future's (JFF) role in the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence initiative?

Marty: The main goal of the Linked Learning Regional Hubs of Excellence initiative is to help students across California gain equitable access to educational and career success. I see JFF as a supportive intermediary in the ongoing work of the regional hubs. The regional hubs are places where community partners collaborate to deliver the benefits of a Linked Learning approach to education pathways—including rigorous academics, work-based learning in workplaces, and embedded support services. We work with leaders of the regional hubs to support their organizational and skills development, as well as strategic positioning.

Joel: In many respects, we're developing, designing, and piloting a model for new kinds of collaboration through a network. And that collaboration can advance important strategies for economic mobility, such as career pathways for high school youth.

As part of this effort, we're coaching leaders to cultivate skills to collaborate across and within sectors—including working with allies and potential competitors. The cross-sector dimension is something unique to this project, and requires certain power-sharing skills, among others, to do well.

What makes the cross-sector dimension unique?

Joel: One aspect of cross-sector dynamics in this initiative is that various leaders within a region are not held accountable to each other through any formal structure. As a result, they need to develop ways to co-design and co-deliver services, and co-validate the kinds of work that each other does. There are numerous influence strategies that leaders use to show the importance of collaboration, and the importance of making organizational changes to work across divides where formal incentives do not exist. Such strategies include creating and facilitating spaces for rich peer learning and co-design work, garnering media attention for the work of the collaborative, and featuring the leadership of others even while being a catalyst for making the joint work and impact visible.

Marty: One thing I'll add is the importance of creating and identifying value propositions for each region to work in an equitable way. There needs to be diverse, cross-sector leadership at the decision-making table in each region. I think that requires leaders to emerge at different points in time across the work and in conversations that occur at multiple levels. We've seen the benefits of this, particularly as regional leaders work through value-propositions and identity for their regional networks. The workforce and economic development partners have pushed back on the established education-oriented assumptions, and have really forced conversations around what career pathways mean for their industries and the health of the regional economy. As an equal partner, they are leading from the perspective and voice of their sector, and this is creating new dialogues. The key benefit has been an inclusiveness that not only speaks to all the sectors, but has shifted assumptions and understanding across sectors.

If we think about systems leadership as "network leadership," I think that gives folks a conceptual framework for understanding how they can operate differently for the cross-sector collaboration to prosper. Traditional hierarchies, or organizational framing from that vantage point, don't work for scaling across multiple sectors and multiple regions.

In the *Issue Brief*, we discuss the characteristics of strong systems leaders. Joel and Marty, can you discuss the progress you've seen in systems leadership development, and what you think has contributed to it?

Joel: I think there has been a lot of progress toward developing collaborative mindsets among regional leaders. In the context of this initiative, leaders can develop a collaborative mindset through working with our coaches, and from the necessity of regular communication between other Linked Learning regional hubs about their experiences. In these interactions, our coaches and our partners have looked at different ways of shaking up our thinking about leadership and collaboration through the lens of Jane Wei-Skillern's work at U.C. Berkeley about network entrepreneurs. For example, the need to lead with "misson not brand," has provided Hub leaders and JFF with key moments of cognitive shift. Operating with a shared language has contributed to the strong growth in relationships and trust between regional leaders.

Marty: I agree. And I think we've witnessed an acceleration of progress by "pushing" the sites toward developing open mindsets and collaborative systems through trust and communication. While still slow at times, I think progress toward systems leadership has been faster than it would be if regional leaders work on their own. We've seen that providing space and capacity building to create reflection and learning moments can help regional leaders become better systems leaders.

Marty, you mentioned earlier the concept of equitable leadership. Can you say more about that?

Marty: We're advocating for a distributive leadership model, which is the idea that any one individual cannot trigger systems change. We've seen sites take themselves out of the leadership role, and encourage folks across their networks and within their organizations to speak on behalf of the network. This approach can strengthen buy-in and elevate perspectives—inside the organization and externally. I think the ability to remove yourself from the lead role or voice has been critically important.

We know that breaking down systemic barriers through addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is paramount for systems change. What has this element looked liked in the Hubs initiative?

Marty: I think this continues to be a work in progress. We are figuring out how best to fold this into the initiative. One challenge we're experiencing is that it doesn't necessarily fit into the leadership models of more hierarchical governmental organizations involved in the regional Hubs. For some leaders, it means shifting operational models to become a bit more vulnerable and reflective about their work. One great example that highlights this vulnerability as well as the risk-taking that is emerging, is a recent conversation that we experienced between the presidents and CEOs of a region and their lead Hub operational team. As they were working through how best to get to the next level of progress, the leaders asked what the operational team needed to be successful. The team responded with amazing candor—they weren't sure other than that they needed the time and space (and thus trust) to invest the time into exploring how the current systems were working, and how best to develop a strategy for moving forward. The ability for this operational team to articulate a need to create space for reflection, work to understand the system from multiple perspectives (across four sectors), and *then* come back with a strategy was really important progress. They were vulnerable leaders focused on creating an inclusive space for understanding the work, both across the sectors and across traditional hierarchies. They were pushing their leadership to demonstrate trust—in the process, in their teams and in the value of the cross-sector work. I see that as really powerful.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share about systems leadership, based on what you've learned over the course of this initiative?

Marty: I think this work is critical to figure out *how* to build and scale transformative agendas, as opposed to strictly focusing on programmatic outcomes and programmatic leadership. We're focusing on how to develop, support, and nurture systems leaders, and help them build personal and organizational capacity to move agendas within their regions.

Joel: I think this initiative is pretty nuanced. It's like math teachers who only learned math one way—it's very difficult for them to explain it to others. So much of this work is about trying to make explicit what is tacit to the systems leaders who have succeeded in this space—and we're making progress. We've had some network leaders begin to articulate the capacities they need to achieve greater collaboration and trust within their regions.