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Human Services Systems Integration: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

It is generally believed that the existing human services structure is most accurately described as an array of potentially related programs that deliver distinct benefits or services to narrowly defined target populations. Each program can be thought of as representing a service silo: a separate and distinct funnel through which money, regulations, and professional norms, and expectations flow. While some overlap across silos has always existed, each usually operates in a relatively self-contained manner. As a whole, the configuration of services available to support and assist families in their efforts to become self-sufficient can be complex, confusing, redundant, and incoherent. The opposite of this silo-based approach to organizing and delivering human services is often coined 'systems integration.' What exactly is systems integration? Building on lessons learned from the field, the authors conclude that, although it is not possible to create one all-encompassing definition of 'service integration,' it *is* possible to develop an overarching, conceptual framework for understanding and analyzing the essential process involved in such efforts to simplify and transform the service experience of target populations. This paper identifies the heterogeneity that exists across these efforts and from it develops a set of organizing principles and constructs for planning a service integration initiative. First, it elaborates on two key dimensions—relationship intensity and institutional similarity—critical for understanding any particular integration effort. Second, it proposes a strategy for framing integration efforts based on these two dimensions. Third, it considers the implications of this framework for developing an integration agenda. Finally, it identifies the basic components of all integration efforts within the context of a dynamic, rather than static, operating environment.

It is generally believed that the existing human services structure is most accurately described as an array of potentially related programs that deliver distinct benefits or services to narrowly defined target populations. Each program can be thought of as representing a service silo: a separate and distinct funnel through which money, regulations, and professional norms and expectations flow. While some overlap across silos has always historically existed, each usually operates in a relatively self-contained manner. As a whole, the configuration of services available to support and assist families in their efforts to become functioning and self-sufficient members of society can be complex, confusing, redundant, and incoherent.[1]

The opposite of this silo-based approach to organizing and delivering human services is often coined 'service integration.' But, what exactly is 'service integration'? Would we recognize an integrated system when we saw one? How would we describe it to others? Would we know if we were moving in the right direction as changes are being introduced? What would we tell others if they asked what we wanted to achieve and why they should support such a vision of reform?

These are not trivial or irrelevant concerns. If we cannot articulate what we want to achieve, then we probably do not know what it is. And if we do not know what we are pursuing, success is likely to prove elusive. Unfortunately, a ready-made definition of service integration does not exist. We have not been able to find a magic threshold that marks the separation of unintegrated service systems from those we would characterize as integrated. This is a bit surprising, given that there are numerous local and state experiments and pilots in operation. Mark Ragan, drawing on extensive field-work completed on behalf of the Rockefeller Institute for Government, concluded that no such 'off-the-shelf' definition exists.

> *There is no single answer. Based on observations…service integration is a combination of strategies that simplifies and facilitates clients' access to benefits and services. Each site has implemented a distinctive mix of strategies, processes, and partner agencies.*[2]

We arrive at a similar conclusion based on our own fieldwork. Currently, many different initiatives being pursued around the country under the rubric of service integration. These initiatives focus on different populations of interest, pursue distinct reform strategies, encompass a variety of institutional partners, and envision unique purposes. Yet, they are all considered service integration reforms by their sponsors. Some of the ways these pilot programs differ include the following:

- *Tactics*—Some involve large one-stop centers, others virtual networks or agreements to work together while maintaining physical separation and distinct management structures, and still others hire someone to 'broker' services for program participants.

- *Scope*—Some are organized around bringing together programs and services that share common purposes (e.g., providing income support) while others blend systems with

[1] This issue has been discussed in other publications. One organization that has drawn attention to it is the Midwest Welfare Peer Assistance Network (WELPAN), a group of high-level welfare officials from Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin who convene regularly to discuss common challenges and solutions faced in administering their welfare reform and related programs. See, in particular, WELPAN (2002). *Eliminating the silos: Or, it's not just welfare anymore*, Institute for Research on Poverty: University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[2] Ragan, M. (2003). Building comprehensive human service systems. *Focus 22*(3), 58-62. Mark Ragan and the authors independently spent time in several sites, including Kenosha and Racine, Wisconsin; El Paso County, Colorado; Montgomery County, Ohio; Anoka County, Minnesota; and San Mateo County, California.

distinct purposes and cultures (e.g., programs that issue benefits with programs that change people's behavior).

- *Purposes*—Some are focused on doing more for particular populations with special needs or which evidence multiple, complex needs while others purport to serve all in a community in an effort to be more comprehensive and less stigmatizing.

This diversity makes the challenge of defining exactly what 'service integration' is all the more daunting. Looking at all these examples, how would we know a legitimate service integration reform when we see it? Further, how would we know what qualities of any particular effort would make it a model of interest to others and thus, compel an investment of our time, energy, and resources to understand it? Ultimately, if the meaning of 'service integration' is substantially determined by individual preferences and local circumstances, is it reasonable to believe a policy agenda in support of the integration of human services can be advanced?

We believe, based on our own observations in numerous local sites, that it is possible to bring order to this chaos, not by seeking a formal definition of service integration, but by developing an overarching, conceptual framework for understanding and analyzing the efforts underway. Despite the fact that what constitutes real integration is site-dependent in many important ways, there is a heterogeneity that exists across these efforts. This heterogeneity allows for the development of a set of organizing principles and constructs for thinking about service integration and through which some conceptual order can be approached.

This paper, after addressing the important issue of labeling these efforts, describes a number of these principles and constructs. First, it elaborates on two key dimensions—relationship intensity and institutional similarity—critical for understanding any particular integration effort. Second, it proposes a strategy for framing integration efforts based on these two dimensions. Third, it considers the implications of this framework for developing an integration agenda. Finally, it identifies the basic components of all integration efforts within the context of a dynamic, rather than static, operating environment.

Addressing the issue of labeling

What should we call these initiatives? The language we use is not a trivial concern since names signal how we think about things. That is why officials give so much thought to what a reorganized agency should be titled. The traditional label of 'service integration' has a long history and most observers appear to understand the term. It has, however, struck us as an inadequate—if not inaccurate—label and seems too limited to capture the full range of efforts going on out there.

Consider the following examples of state-initiated integration efforts that illustrate the diversity encompassed by the service integration agenda:

> *Michigan* has initiated a set of local pilot programs called JET (Jobs, Education, and Training). The population of interest is TANF families. The agencies/programs being brought to the table include local workforce boards, Michigan Works! agencies, and local human services offices. The vision is to create a comprehensive approach to connecting families with the kinds of jobs, education, and training they need to achieve self-sufficiency. Components include a comprehensive intake process; a single plan for participating families;

coordination of all family, employment, and training services; and joint and coordinated local program plans.

Minnesota is working toward a state strategy for addressing the needs of long-term welfare recipients, starting with a few pilot initiatives. The driving vision is to improve the economic and familial stability of Minnesota Family Independence Program (MFIP) participants who have serious and multiple challenges by addressing their situation in a coordinated, intensive fashion. Each local program varies somewhat but most bring together employment, health, and a host of social service providers to focus on these families holistically.

Utah has focused on improving outcomes for youth aging out of foster care. The departments involved in the effort include Workforce Services, Human Services, and Health as well as the Office of Education and the courts. The agencies are developing a statewide capacity, including coordinated case planning, streamlined referral processes, establishment of service priorities, and leveraging of existing resources, to achieve the goals of developing a positive sense of self, establishing supportive and enduring relationships, having health care access, achieving educational attainment and stable employment, and securing safe and stable housing.

Wisconsin has initiated a set of pilots under its project called Wisconsin Families Forward. The target population is families either engaged, or at-risk of engagement, in the TANF and child welfare systems. The premise is that healthy families and self-sufficient families go hand in hand, but that local sites know best how to promote this connection. Organizations involved include Wisconsin Works agencies, child welfare service providers, schools, mental health providers, and substance abuse providers. Components vary by pilot site but often include coordinated intake, assessment, and referral processes; single case plans; and integrated case management.

These initiatives suggest that the label 'service integration'—particularly the word 'service'—does not capture what is occurring. Given that the so-called integration agenda, broadly speaking, encompasses benefit-issuing programs, programs that deliver defined services, as well as programs that are organized around changing the behavior of individuals, families, and communities, the term 'service' appears to cover only a subset of the programs and agencies that might be involved. This constraining language might suggest that only certain programs or agencies that deliver specific types of social services should be involved. We think this conclusion discounts the ambitious scope of efforts to think outside the box, efforts that envision institutional linkages that others might not consider.

We therefore believe a more appropriate term is 'system,' which Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines as "a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items [in this case, programs and agencies] forming a unified whole." We believe the word 'system' conveys a broader sense of the range of programs and agencies that are involved in various collaborative striving to form a more unified whole.

We do not have the same concern about the term 'integration,' although we offer a word of caution here as well. In some instances the word 'integration' might suggest a level of institutional intimacy that demands removal of the boundaries and distinct programmatic cultures that sustain the individual identities of separate programs. In reality, many legitimate purposes can be achieved absent this level of institutional interaction.

Given this, we employ the label *systems integration* in relation to efforts to overcome programmatic silos and thus, will employ it from this point forward (while acknowledging that not all successful initiatives demand full integration).

Developing a conceptual framework

How, then, should we start thinking about systems integration?

Our work with local systems integration initiatives revealed some commonalities across these efforts, no matter how different they appeared to be on the surface. While problems, purposes, populations, and programs might differ dramatically across sites, two underlying dimensions of reform seemed to tell us a lot about the character of the systems integration effort, particularly in relation to how ambitious it was and how uncertain its prospects for success. These two dimensions underlying the pursuit of systems integration are critical, both to understanding the character of any particular effort and to identifying what it will take to make this concept of integration work.

The first dimension is the extent to which the participating programs or agencies are drawn from similar or dissimilar institutional cultures. We call this the *institutional similarity* dimension. Are potential institutional partners similar in structure, operating procedures, and norms or do they differ in some fundamental ways? To the extent they are dissimilar in how they think of themselves and in how they go about their business, the challenges to integration increase.

The second dimension is the intensity of the interaction (or degree of blending) sought between participating programs and agencies. We call this the *relationship intensity* dimension. This underlying construct helps us understand the character of the institutional relationships among participating programs and agencies. It helps us think through whether we are talking about modest levels of interaction across potential institutional partners, or levels of interaction that are more profound and which require more organizational change and dislocation.

We believe these two dimensions are generic across integration efforts, irrespective of the substantive content of each initiative. We also believe that understanding an initiative in terms of these two underlying dimensions tells us a lot about how to proceed. That is, they have both diagnostic and planning implications.

Institutional Similarity. The first key dimension of interest involves the extent to which local efforts draw together programs and agencies that represent similar or dissimilar institutional cultures. As noted above, we call this the *institutional similarity* dimension.

We have written about institutional 'culture' or 'milieu' elsewhere and thus will only briefly recapture the underlying concepts here.[3] We have defined an organization's 'culture' as a "shorthand term for the underlying norms, values, and behavioral patterns that shape the way an agency functions and makes decisions."[4] What often best dictates this system's culture is its fundamental purpose. Does a program essentially distribute a benefit, deliver a defined service, or intervene with families to remedy difficult problems or transform behavior and attitudes?

[3] See Corbett, T., Dimas, J., Fong, J., and Noyes, J. (2005). The challenge of institutional 'milieu' to cross-systems integration. *Focus 24*(1), 28-35.

[4] Ibid, p. 28.

To illustrate, one can think about a program that distributes food stamp benefits. The required protocols can be complicated but are quite repetitive. The core activities of such programs involve the execution of prescribed rules in an efficient and accurate manner. Little discretion is permitted on the front lines and good performance is judged by the efficient application of rules in an invariant, accurate manner. These kinds of programs fit well in a bureaucratic, rule-driven, top-down institutional culture.

At the other extreme, there are programs and agencies that are transformative in character. They tend to work with whole families or communities and are designed to change the way individuals relate to one another and to society in general. Such programs tend to be less about delivering specific benefits and more about changing behavior. They often tend to focus on families with multiple issues that need to be addressed. As such, the interactions between client and system tend to be less predictable. More discretion is applied to responding to customer needs with the rote application of prescribed rules being less useful. Not surprisingly, these program types function less well in bureaucratic environments. They flower in institutional cultures that facilitate professional norms, risk-taking, flexibility, and innovation.

There are, of course, many programs that contain elements drawn from both ends of this continuum of institutional cultures. For example, consider many systems designed to help low-income adults with children achieve and sustain employment. Some aspects of these initiatives are quite routinized in character, such as determining whether a job seeker (or training participant) qualifies for subsidized child care. Other aspects can be less formalized, such as upgrading basic workplace behaviors to improve job retention. Finally, other aspects can be quite individualized, such as counseling adults with multiple work barriers. There may exist within the same program both routinized and nonroutinized elements.

Given this, we have denoted three basic types of human services programs or agencies: a) routinized, b) mixed, and c) nonroutinized, where:

- *Routinized* programs or agencies are those that engage in core tasks or activities that are rule-driven and repeated without significant variation. Most benefits-issuing programs fall into this category.

- *Mixed* programs or agencies have some routinized elements such as a focus on determining eligibility for scarce benefits but also encompass tasks that seek to alter individual or family functioning. As noted, many work-oriented welfare systems fall into this category.

- *Nonroutinized* programs or agencies typically are characterized by a reliance on professional norms, collegial rule-making environments, flatter institutional hierarchies, and significant discretion at the front lines. Many, though not all, social service agencies that deal with very problematic family issues often fall into this category.

As discussed in other publications, putting together programs with similar organizational cultures, although difficult, is less daunting than blending programs or agencies drawn from different cultures.[5] For example, integrating two benefit programs might demand changes in eligibility criteria and supportive information technologies, but workers in these two systems ought to feel

[5] Ibid, p. 29

relatively comfortable working together. They should feel comfortable operating in a system that is hierarchical and rule-driven even if the rules are different in the programs being brought together.

This is not necessarily the case in pursuing systems integration across organizational cultures. Let us say policy entrepreneurs wish to blend together a routinized benefits-issuing program and a nonroutinized behavior-changing program. The former is rule-driven and bureaucratic; the latter requires high levels of discretion and professional judgment. It does not take much imagination to see where the workers operating in these two programmatic cultures might have difficulty in understanding one another and in working together.

Figure 1, which is a simple matrix, is designed to illustrate the levels of complexity inherent in seeking to achieve systems integration based on institutional similarity. Along the vertical axis, we position the three types of institutional cultures (cultural types) in order from routinized to nonroutinized. Along the horizontal axis, we position the institutional cultures of the other program to be integrated. Initiatives that require the integration of similar programmatic cultures are denoted by the letter "A." Those that require integration of either routinized or nonroutinized cultures with mixed cultures are denoted by the letter "B" to signal the increasing difficulty of these efforts as compared to those that involve similar programmatic cultures. The most challenging integration effort—that which requires the integration of routinized and nonroutinized cultures—is denoted by the letter "C."

Figure 1

INTEGRATION CHALLENGE:
INSTITUTIONAL SIMILARITY MATRIX

	SECOND CULTURAL TYPE		
FIRST CULTURAL TYPE	Routinized	Mixed	Nonroutinized
Routinized	A	B	C
Mixed	B	A	B
Nonroutinized	C	B	A

Relationship Intensity. The second key dimension is *relationship intensity*. Figure 2 below is an adaptation of a continuum developed in El Paso County, Colorado, which has implemented a much-discussed and admired model of human services reform.[6] This continuum suggests a natural ordering along the intensity of relationships between and among programs and agencies. In effect, it orders the extent to which participating programs and agencies forfeit some of their identity and defining attributes in an effort to develop a truly blended system. In doing this, the continuum focuses on the character and quality of the relationships among participating programs and agencies; specifically, how closely participating systems are to be blended together.

Figure 2 takes these relationships and orders them into a continuum that moves from relationships where officials from individual programs talk more amongst themselves to relationships where distinct program and agency identities are lost.

[6] Hudson, R. (2003). *A Vision for Eliminating Poverty and Family Violence, Transforming Child Welfare and TANF in El Paso County, Colorado.* Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.

Figure 2

RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY CONTINUUM[7]

Communication—*Clear, consistent and nonjudgmental discussions; giving or exchanging information in order to maintain meaningful relationships. Individual programs or causes are totally separate.*

Cooperation—*Assisting each other with respective activities, giving general support, information, and/or endorsement for each other's programs, services, or objectives.*

Coordination—*Joint activities and communications are more intensive and far-reaching. Agencies or individuals engage in joint planning and synchronization of schedules, activities, goals, objectives, and events.*

Collaboration—*Agencies, individuals, or groups willingly relinquish some of their autonomy in the interest of mutual gains or outcomes. True collaboration involves actual changes in agency, group, or individual behavior to support collective goals or ideals.*

Convergence—*Relationships evolve from collaboration to actual restructuring of services, programs, memberships, budgets, missions, objectives, and staff.*

Consolidation—*Agency, group, or individual behavior, operations, policies, budgets, staff, and power are united and harmonized. Individual autonomy or gains have been fully relinquished, common outcomes and identity adopted.*

This continuum, then, starts with efforts to improve communication across participating systems and steadily moves toward more intensive forms of integration. Movement toward greater integration makes blended funding increasingly important and also places greater demands on policymakers and program managers. To achieve full consolidation, all aspects of program design and management must be addressed, creating demands far exceeding the requirements for merely, as an example, collocating related services.

This scale is useful, but it does not advance our understanding of specific initiatives. Therefore, in Figure 3, we provide more information about each dimension (or rung) on the Relationship Intensity Continuum in terms of the actions, relationships, and/or agreements that more specifically define what each rung might actually represent. For example, agencies and programs are positioned on the *communication* rung when they regularly meet, exchange information, and maybe even have some informal agreements about how to handle certain common challenges or clients. The level of communication must intensify, however, before we might call it *cooperation*.

The quality of interactions, as suggested by the associated tasks and tactics, become even more formal, regularized, and detailed as one moves further along the continuum. One cannot

[7] This is a modified version of the service delivery continuum developed in El Paso County, Colorado, as reported in Ragan, M. (2003). Building comprehensive human service systems. *Focus 22*(3), 58-62.

legitimately talk about *coordination* or *collaboration* until participating agencies are working together in a meaningful way as evidenced by such actions as developing cross-training programs or integrating application protocols and eligibility standards. Likewise, one probably cannot label a local effort as achieving *convergence* or *consolidation* until there is evidence of shared resources and the loss of distinct program identities.

Certainly, one can argue about the ordering or whether the appropriate indicators are positioned under the correct rung. Still, one can trace a path from merely talking to one another, to actions designed to work together, to contractual arrangements designed to blend operations, to more aggressive steps that obscure the distinct identity of the participating programs and systems.

Figure 3 also introduces the notion of 'levels.' We think of levels as transition points that mark qualitatively different thresholds in the intensity level of any integration effort. That is, as one moves from a Level 1 to Level 2, the degree of difficulty increases significantly, as does the risk of failure.

The three levels can be thought of as follows:

> *Level 1*—Integration efforts at Level 1 are thought to rely heavily on better communications across existing programs and systems. Steps are taken to better acquaint participating programs with each others' rules and services; cross-training may take place; new people may be hired to help families take advantage of existing programs; new technologies may expand what staff and customers know about each others' domains. In some instances, this expanded cross-program awareness may lead to changes in the way individual programs operate both individually and in concert. That is, evidence of cooperation across participating programs may be apparent. But such changes seldom result in formal, widespread, or substantive transformations in existing protocols or service technologies.
>
> *Level 2*—At Level 2, reform efforts move into more formal, sometimes contractual, agreements across participating programs. Sites at this level begin to develop missions and outcomes that cut across traditional program lines. They begin to formally develop service and management protocols that blend important functions such as diagnosing customer needs at the front end, tracking families along appropriate service paths, or monitoring progress and resolving disputes over how best to deal with intersystem conflict regarding how best to deal with families. Still, participating programs retain much of their individual identities and core management functions (e.g., distinct budgets and program identities).
>
> *Level 3*—At Level 3, the separate programs and systems begin to lose their distinct identities. Core functions such as budgeting, personnel decisions, and determining and monitoring success become increasingly blended. Most importantly, customers and the public are less able to identify with which agency or specific program they are interacting. Program boundaries dissolve and agency identity becomes increasingly seamless to consumers. Customer needs, and not the way programs are organized, become the driving force that shapes what the service system looks like and how it functions.

Figure 3

ENHANCED RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY SCALE

Level 1:	*Communication*	■ *procedures for information sharing* ■ *regular interagency meetings on common problems and opportunities* ■ *informal service 'brokering' arrangements.*
	Cooperation	■ *task forces, advisory groups, committees that review/approve plans* ■ *consensus concerning best practices* ■ *cross system's dialogue and/or training* ■ *cooperative monitoring / case reviews*
Level 2:	*Coordination*	■ *formal interagency agreements to "coordinate"* ■ *joint mission statement / principles* ■ *joint training/retraining/cross training* ■ *contractual procedures for resolving inter-agency disputes* ■ *temporary personnel reassignments* ■ *coordinated eligibility standards*
	Collaboration	■ *coordinated personnel qualification standards* ■ *single application form / process* ■ *common case management protocols* ■ *centralized functional administration* ■ *coordinated IT / (re) programming authority*
Level 3:	*Convergence*	■ *contractual provisions for fund transfers / reallocations* ■ *contractual "lead agency" agreements* ■ *pooled resources / budget contributions*
	Consolidation	■ *multi-agency/multi-task/multi-discipline service plans & budgets* ■ *seamless interagency service delivery teams* ■ *fully blended interagency planning / division of labor / responsibility* ■ *shared human capital / physical capital assets*

Figure 4 gives us a simplified array of the complexity inherent in moving from communication to collaboration and, ultimately, to consolidation. For illustrative purposes, it focuses only on integration efforts that involve similar institutional cultures. In this matrix, initiatives that focus on communication are denoted by the number "1." Those that require collaboration are denoted by the number "2" to signal the increasing difficulty of these efforts as compared to those that focus on communication. The most challenging integration effort—that which requires consolidation—is denoted by the number "3."

Figure 4

INTEGRATION CHALLENGE:
RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY MATRIX*

INSTITUTIONAL SIMILARITY "A"		**RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY**		
		Level 1	***Level 2***	***Level 3***
First	**Second**	**Communication**	**Collaboration**	**Consolidation**
Routinized	Routinized	1	2	3
Mixed	Mixed	1	2	3
Nonroutinized	Nonroutinized	1	2	3

* For simplicity, this represents integration efforts between systems with similar cultures, or those that would labeled with the letter "A" under the Institutional Similarity Matrix reflected in Table 1.

As one moves from one level to the next, the necessary investment in time, energy, and resources increases disproportionately. Thus, the decision to move along this continuum, and especially to move from one level to the next, should not be taken lightly. One guiding principle identified in our work to date is to avoid implementing more change than is needed to accomplish the goal. That is, if enhancing communication and cooperation is sufficient to achieve your purposes, think carefully before moving from Level 1 to Level 2 types of institutional relationships. At the same time, however, if the change desired really does require Level 3 relationships, do not be satisfied with Level 1 tactics and strategies.

Framing systems integration efforts

We believe every systems integration effort can be viewed in light of the two dimensions of *institutional similarity* and *relationship intensity.* That is, if we think through what level of interaction we need across participating programs and we know how similar or dissimilar the programs are to one another, we should be able to determine how complex the proposed institutional marriages are and what impediments to a successful marriage must be addressed. However, none of the preceding figures reflect the challenge inherent in moving along the relationship intensity continuum—from communication to collaboration and, ultimately, to consolidation—while integrating dissimilar cultures.

Figure 5 draws information from Figures 1 and 4 in order to illustrate the complexity of increasing levels of challenge presented as cultural types and relationship intensity intermix and increase, respectively. That is, how should we think about systems integration when we are blending programs that reflect different types of institutional cultures? The first column groups the three previously identified potential pairs of institutional cultures using the letters of "A," "B," and "C" in order to denote the increasing integration challenge they represent. The last three columns group the three previously identified potential levels of integration using the numbers "1," "2," and "3," again in order to denote the increasing integration challenge they represent. For illustrative purposes, Figure 5 assumes only those integration efforts that encompass two distinct systems; efforts that encompass greater numbers of entities—which is often the case—are inherently more complex.

Although no systems integration effort can be thought of as 'simple,' within Figure 5 the upper left cell (A1) represents the most direct, and least intrusive, integration challenge: similar cultural types (represented by the A) attempting to integrate at Level 1 (represented by the 1). In this instance, perhaps more staff meetings or enhanced communication systems will achieve the purposes of reform. It is possible, however, that mere communication is not enough and the relationship intensity of the integration effort needs to increase. That is, additional communications across program staffs prove insufficient, and reformers must introduce changes in the way that people do their jobs. In this scenario, the integration effort across similar cultures moves across the matrix from cell A1 to A2. If the changes are dramatic enough, job functions and staff recruitment and program protocols may be so altered that the original programs almost cease to exist as distinct entities, which is represented by a shift to cell A3.

Figure 5

INTEGRATION CHALLENGE: INSTITUTIONAL SIMILARITY –RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY MATRIX*

SIMILARITY INDEX	**CULTURAL TYPES**		**RELATIONSHIP INTENSITY**		
			Level 1	***Level 2***	***Level 3***
	First	**Second**	**Communication**	**Collaboration**	**Consolidation**
A	Routinized Mixed Nonroutinized	Routinized Mixed Nonroutinized	A1	A2	A3
B	Routinized Nonroutinized	Mixed Mixed	B1	B2	B3
C	Routinized	Nonroutinized	C1	C2	C3

* For simplicity, this represents integration efforts between two systems. Efforts that encompass more than two systems are inherently more complex.

However, in other efforts we might be looking at the integration of dissimilar programs and agencies that do very different things and thus, have quite distinct institutional cultures. The increased complexity of such an effort depends on the breadth of the dissimilarity between cultures as well as on the extent of the integration pursued. In Figure 5, this increased complexity is represented first by a shift down to cell B1, which denotes a one-level increase in the similarity index with no increase in relationship intensity. Again, however, it may be determined that improving communications among workers drawn from these different institutional cultures is not enough and thus, an effort is made to move from cell B1 to B2 and then from B2 to B3.

The most complex efforts to integrate systems are represented in the C cells, which involve the two most dissimilar cultures: routinized and nonroutinized. Within this model, the frontier of systems integration is to push the envelope to cell C3, which reflects full consolidation of systems with dissimilar cultures.

Why is it that increasing the relationship intensity across different cultural underpinnings makes the whole enterprise more challenging? Consider front-line workers in a benefits-issuing program. In what kind of operating environment do they typically function? While they may interact with clients, that interaction is formalized. They focus on obtaining information to decide eligibility and perhaps the level of benefits. They are judged on the accuracy of their data collecting and rule application operations. In many instances, they see their role as one of guarding the public purse from waste and fraud. Thus, they might view the client with cynicism or distrust.

Now, think of the social worker in a nonroutinized, service-oriented environment. In many instances, that worker is supposed to establish a relationship with the client. They collect data but for the purposes of helping the individual or family function more productively. They may have rules but can be rewarded for exercising imagination and flexibility in how they carry out their responsibilities. They often work with other professionals or as members of a team and thus may be rewarded for what we call boundary-spanning. They think of themselves as professionals with a certain skill set.

So, what happens when you blend two programs that operate with these respective workers on the front lines? Perhaps if they are simply expected to communicate more, there will be modest conflict and tension, but it can be made to work. They would have to get used to each others' language, expectations, and work styles, but many of these potential conflicts might be ameliorated through training and continuing contact.

However, when the relationship intensity level is enhanced, the impediments to success increase dramatically. If they must work in the same office, share common cases, work toward agreed upon ends, arrive at a consensus about what to do with a troubled family, or mutually agree upon responses to nonperformance by the client, the potential for disagreement and misunderstanding increases exponentially. If one worker has spent a professional lifetime looking for moments of misrepresentation by clients and another has looked for opportunities to help, they simply might not get on the same page easily.

This is the integration agenda that evokes the most problematic challenges tapping a host of what we term 'below the waterline' phenomena that are discussed in detail elsewhere.[8] This whole murky area under the waterline of formal organizational rules and job descriptions and protocols for handling different situations is where each program develops its own unique style. It is where custom and background and tradition and personal dispositions, as honed and ingrained through professional experience and reinforcement, serve to shape and inform how workers see themselves and their institutional roles. And this deep-structure set of expectations and norms goes far toward determining what signals are sent to customers, actual and potential. This is where the frontier of systems integration work is positioned and where real progress probably cannot occur absent sustained support and investment.

Implications for pursuing systems integration

What does this conceptual framework contribute to the pursuit of systems integration? Ultimately, it means that there is no and can be no singular standard based on process for determining what does or does not constitute a successful systems integration effort. In our view, success should be based on pursuing the level of integration necessary to transform the service

[8] Ibid.

experience of target families in ways that are consistent with the outcomes envisioned, and not on some sort of universal standard or abstract definition for an idealized concept of integration. The key is to calibrate with precision what it will take in terms of new policies and protocols to transform the customers experience in such a way that anticipated outcomes are reasonable.

This transformed customer experience can best be accomplished by starting with a set of framing questions rather than a priori answers. You cannot merely assume that more integration is better, or that all integration, no matter what kind of institutional marriage is being contemplated, will be a good or doable thing. Rather, a policy entrepreneur must be prepared to engage in a rigorous *visioning process*. As suggested at the outset, they must look hard at what they want to achieve, for whom, and why. If they have a vision of what they want to achieve, that vision may provide some clarity about why they should take on the difficulties associated with blending programs with diverse and even contradictory institutional cultures.

A potentially successful visioning process requires adopting a perspective or attitude premised largely on placing the client or customer at the center of the planning process. Typical start-up planning questions include the following:

- What target populations are served, or ought to be served, by the various programs in our service network and for what reasons do they seek help?
- How can we best address the needs of these families regardless of how they enter our system?
- What are the least intrusive services we can provide to assist the family?
- Which model will assist us in serving families in the best possible manner?
- Which model represents the best fit with our current service delivery system and environment?
- Which model would be most compatible with the purposes we wish to achieve and for the target population on which we are focusing?

This leads to a more elaborate process which we call the *line-of-sight* exercise, which is described in greater detail elsewhere and thus is not elaborated upon here.[9] The basis of any line-of-sight exercise is the following core question: What will it take to alter the customer's experience in ways that plausibly might lead to desired outcomes? Thinking about systems integration in this way shifts the perspective from a focus on process or structure to a focus on the character of the customer-system interaction. This subtly shifts our perspective from what we do to bureaucracies to what we do for people; a nuanced, yet critical, shift.

Nevertheless, grounding success in consumer-focused outcomes does not necessarily mean that we ignore systems attributes. On the contrary, local officials often identify changes in how systems function as excellent markers for assessing progress in transforming the customer's

[9] See Corbett, T. & Noyes, J. (2005). Cross-systems innovations: The line-of-sight exercise, or getting from where you are to where you want to be. *Focus 24*(1), 36- 41.

experience. Figure 6 lists the benefits associated with a variety of system attributes that have been identified as important to various innovative sites around the country.[10]

Figure 6

Integrated Systems Attributes of Interest

Broader population coverage—Broader segments of the community are reached, at least relative to categorical programs that deal with specific problems.

Coherence—Assistance encompasses services, benefits, and opportunities that relate to one another in some rational way and are consistent with the ends being sought.

Comprehensiveness—Consumers have access to a greater variety of services.

Convenience—Consumers seeking help can access services more easily and at less cost.

Cost efficiency—Available funds are used more effectively.

Differential systems engagement—Consumers engage the system at different levels of intensity (from self-service to the use of comprehensive teams tapping multiple programs and service technologies).

Flexible use of funds—Diverse funding streams are blended or braided in creative and more effective ways.

Individualization of services—Greater systems responsiveness to differentiated presenting problems and to changing circumstances.

Mainstreaming/stigma reduction—The stigma associated certain population subgroups or programs is diminished because larger segments of the community are served by blended systems.

Outcomes-driven—Policy development and service delivery structures are designed based on outcomes in contrast to input or process measures.

Participatory—The consumer participates in the development of service plans.

Preventive—A focus shift from crisis intervention and problem remediation to prevention.

Process efficiency—Activities and processes are streamlined or redundancies eliminated, leading to less duplication of effort.

Simultaneity—Consumers can access multiple services at the same time.

Timeliness—Assistance is provided when needed, not when convenient for the system.

Transformed community/political perceptions—Communities view social service systems more as community assets and less as mere deliverers of program services or public benefits.

These systems attributes are not the end product of any integration effort. Rather, they serve as indicators or benchmarks that customers are being treated differently and that the institutional

[10] This is not an exhaustive list. It represents those attributes of interest most often cited in our fieldwork.

culture of the system is being pushed in the right direction. Change that does not mean anything is not likely to result in a substantive transformation in the client's experience. Note, however, that the weight given to each of these attributes probably varies significantly across sites. That is, each site must determine what is important to them, given their local situation and the purposes for engaging in reform.

Obviously, whether or not these alleged benefits actually materialize depends on the quality of the design and implementation of any given model. Simply bringing programs and policies together may not be enough. How well diverse institutional cultures are bridged and professional perspectives blended in practice may say a lot about whether consumer experiences are transformed and positive outcomes actually realized.[11]

Moreover, whether or not certain attributes are important in any given reform effort depends upon our central concern: In what ways do we want to transform the customer's experience? All change is not equal. Too often, that is, we approach the integration challenge as if it were a bloodless bureaucratic exercise. We worry about budgets and staff allocations and turf. We talk about increasing efficiency and reducing redundancy. Most existing frameworks for thinking about systems integration remain one step removed from what is really critical: how the experiences of the intended target population are transformed.

This is a theme to which we repeatedly return. Why is that? In the end, pursuing systems integration well is a fine exercise in calibrating what is desired and what is feasible. If you try to do too much, particularly in light of what is necessary to achieve anticipated client outcomes, you will confront unnecessary impediments to success. That is, if you seek an unnecessarily ambitious level of relationship intensity (or try to blend programs with conflicting cultures) without justification, you are asking for difficulty.

A way of thinking, not an event

We touch upon one final principle in our exploratory thinking about systems integration. In the end, this is not about buildings or organization charts or who gets what money. The integration challenge is less about creating a static plan for change than reframing how we think about effecting change.

Too often, we think of reform as an event or a transition. We pass a law, change a policy, or introduce a new program and then assume that the presenting problem is solved. The kind of integration we have been talking about is different. Developing and implementing a systems integration model is not an event, but rather a dynamic process. Moreover, the temporal dynamic of pursuing systems integration is stretched out by the ambitiousness of the vision being pursued. Before exploring this theme further, let us review some of the basic components of systems integration common to all efforts.

Assess the Situation—Systems integration initiatives typically start with an assessment of the current situation. Such an assessment may focus on one or two existing programs or agencies, or a set of service needs, or an overall appraisal of community needs. "Community" is an elastic concept, stretching from neighborhood to service area, to a whole state. Whatever the differences in any given situation, a common element remains: the desire for some rigorous information on

[11] For a fuller discussion of some of these complexities, see Corbett, T., Dimas, J., Fong, J., and Noyes, J. (2005). The challenge of institutional 'milieu' to cross-systems integration. *Focus 24* (1), 28-35.

what is needed, how well the current configuration of services meets those needs, and what kinds of changes may be warranted.

Develop a Vision—Perhaps the most critical step in the life cycle of a cross-systems development exercise is creating a consensus sense of mission. What is the vision driving the exercise, why are you doing this? Not only must an overarching purpose be articulated, but appropriate buy-in must be secured. In addition, general goals eventually must be translated into measurable objectives, and investments in both data infrastructure and management supports to use performance measures and population indicators must be forthcoming.

Do a 'Line-of-Sight' Exercise—Completing a line-of-sight exercise (including an outcome-sequence chart) essentially involves several key steps in any planning process. First, you must adopt a visioning process where you put yourself in the shoes of your intended target population. Second, you must understand how they experience the existing system. Third, you must go through each sequential step in the customer's tenure with the system: outreach, entry, diagnostics and referral, service delivery, monitoring and accountability, and exit. At each step, think through what must be changed to realistically achieve the purposes of reform. Finally, defend to yourself and your partners each proposed change being contemplated—explain why you believe it is warranted.

Develop a Plan—Integrated service models are, by their nature, collaborative undertakings. Likely and potential partners or collaborators must be identified early in the process. Strategies must be developed to bring them to the table, and to sustain their interest and participation over time. One must think through the incentive structure essential to developing longer-term institutional relationships as well as the institutional, language, technological, resource-based, and personal barriers that may inhibit full communication and cooperation.

Re-engineer Systems—This is a catch-all step that encompasses a host of practical issues and challenges. How do you ensure that actual and potential customers really experience something different in the new system? All the paper changes in the world do not mean anything if the customer experience is not transformed. All the essential pieces of any system—outreach and marketing, the front end steps of enrollment and eligibility and diagnostics, the processes of engagement and service/benefits delivery, ongoing assessment including trouble shooting and adaptation, and the end game involving exit and any post-involvement follow-up—must be considered and transformed to accommodate the new vision of an integrated system. In the end, this means developing new policies and protocols as well as re-engineering existing systems. In some cases, it may involve creating new physical plants.

Manage to Outcomes—Finally, the new system must be rigorously assessed in an ongoing fashion. These are issues more exhaustively discussed in the companion paper on accountability and effectiveness,[12] though Figure 6 enumerates an array of systems attributes that might be measured to determine progress. At a minimum, we must consider the following evaluative challenges: a process analysis to determine if our operational objectives are actually being met in reality; performance or outcome assessments to determine if specific program objectives are being approached; population monitoring to assess whether we can detect any positive movement

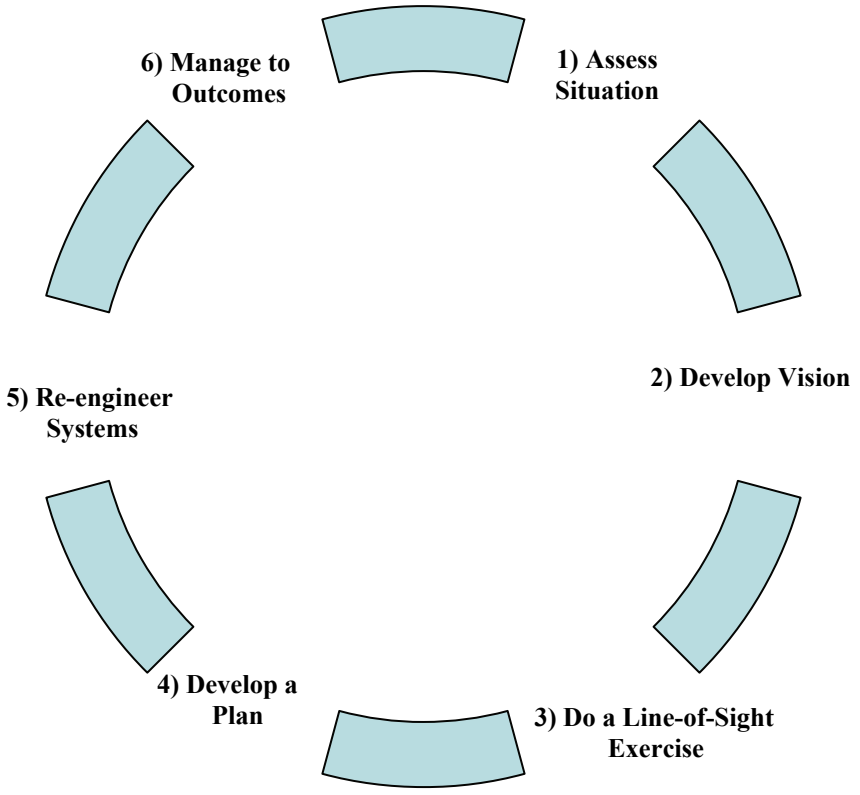
[12] Corbett, T., and Noyes, J. (2006, July). *Integrated human service models: Assessing implementation fidelity through the 'line of sight' perspective*. Working draft presented at the summer meeting of the Grantmakers Income Security Taskforce, Washington, D.C.

in the population attributes that we had hoped to influence; and impact evaluations or whether we can attribute any success specifically to our new interventions.

Figure 7 illustrates this ongoing planning and implementation process. One pass around the circle should suggest possibilities and opportunities for further change. In fact, steps 1-4 might be done several times before moving on. Monitoring and evaluation ought to be taken seriously, not necessarily as a way of judging success and failure, but for providing input for what comes next. Finally, the life cycle concept suggests that we can start at any place in the scales introduced earlier in this paper and work our way progressively toward the other end. To employ a somewhat overused sports analogy, pursuing integration is a marathon, not a sprint.

Figure 7

Systems Integration Life Cycle



This illustration also suggests another critical aspect of pursuing integration. This process of change is intimately wedded to the nature of the reform being attempted. That is, if you are doing something simple, envision an integration model that would fall in A1 of Figure 5. In such a scenario, one might actually consider a reasonably focused and limited planning and implementation process—one time around our hypothetical circle describing key activities.

But what if we were visioning a set of changes better represented by cell C3 in Figure 5? Here we are talking about intensive relationship levels and complex mixes of institutional cultures. It is hard to envision such an ambitious agenda being accomplished in a single turn around the planning circle. In this instance, we would need to think about several spins with intermediate objectives being pursued with each effort. The astute planner will recognize that cultural integration is never achieved overnight and establish appropriate benchmarks for measuring progress along the way.

A concluding thought

Our work with sites around the country suggests that Mark Ragan is essentially correct—there is no single, unambiguous definition of 'systems integration.' At the same time, we believe it is possible to apply a framework to systems integration initiatives, allowing for some structure to be used in analyzing their implementation while understanding there is no one process standard by which to judge them.

The bottom line of this framework is the purposes driving a given initiative. What do you want to alter about how customers are treated? What kinds of outcomes in customer behaviors and community circumstances do you want to achieve? It is this understanding that informs what success might look like. In some situations, rather minimal changes might suffice. In others, perhaps full consolidation involving programs tapping dissimilar cultures is required. In all cases, however, there must be a plausible link between what is to be achieved and the strategy for getting there.

Moreover, where a reform effort is at any point in time is not necessarily where it will end up. Systems integration is a process, not an event. The very act of introducing changes at Level 1 may raise issues or suggest possibilities at Levels 2 or 3. Or, the challenges encountered in pushing for more intensive levels of integration may lead policy entrepreneurs to conclude that the same ends can be attained without the trauma attached to more ambitious strategies. Ultimately, pursuing systems integration is more a mind set than a set of activities.

There is one inescapable conclusion to all this. As local policy entrepreneurs push the envelope of change and innovation, the level of difficulty—and thus the challenge—of the effort increases. One analogy is to a diver, standing at the end of the diving platform 10 meters above the water. The choice the diver faces is clear: either a safer dive that is easier but which carries less reward or the more difficult alternative that carries a higher reward but also a greater risk of failure.

In sites around the country, policy entrepreneurs are choosing to pursue the more difficult alternative in search of the higher reward of improved outcomes for children and families. Yet, working alone, and without support and guidance, the waters below will look distant and dangerous, indeed. We must find ways of supporting those who are risking the more difficult dive.