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ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE
Report to the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in August 2008. The information used in this report was collected in the summer of 2007. Further details on the data collection are presented in the report.

We appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff and the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

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INTRODUCTION, HIGHLIGHTS & IMPLICATIONS

The electronic communications strategies utilized as part of the Discovery initiative were designed, in large part, to reinforce peer learning and other capacity building efforts. The Memorial Fund's earlier initiative, Children First, offered regular convenings of its seven community grantees and considerable on-site technical assistance support. However, early on Memorial Fund staff recognized that providing frequent convenings and on-site technical assistance with 49 communities would be impossible. It was also recognized that communities would have widely varying capacities and resource needs, and therefore need different kinds of information and support at different points in time. The idea of using technology to create an online learning environment and a venue for real-time communication quickly surfaced.

The Discovery website was launched in the fall of 2003. Its purpose is to archive and document the work of communities and the technical assistance tools and resources as well as capture literature, tools and research relevant to the work of Discovery.

From the beginning, the Discovery website was viewed as a capacity building support for communities and a knowledge development tool. In addition to creating a learning environment, the Memorial Fund sought to archive the work and learning of communities and the foundation. Though the Discovery community collaborative members have always been perceived as the main audience for the website, staff believed that the tools and products of this work would be of use and interest to others working in this field. Therefore, the website is publicly available and can be accessed from the main Memorial Fund website.

At the same time, **the Discovery listserv** was set up to provide another, different kind of vehicle for cross-community sharing and communication. An online "bulletin board" was established early on in the initiative, but was not utilized by communities. The Memorial Fund staff believed that a more active online communication tool would be useful to community collaborative members. **The weekly digest message** was developed to start and maintain a constant flow of key research, events and information with Discovery communities. It was expected that the website and listserv would function as sharing tools, allowing communities to access a wealth of "unfiltered" information about the work of their peers and the field.

Unlike the other capacity building supports, such as workshops, liaison visits, and the annual Stone Soup conference, these electronic resources are accessed by individuals on their own. A user can log on to the Discovery website or send a message to the listserv at any time of the day or night. Resources and tools are accessed on an as needed basis. When an individual in a community is interested or the community is "ready" for a particular resource, it is immediately

available. However, unlike a workshop or training environment, the user may not have immediate access to peer and/or expert advice and support.

Use of electronic communications tools is affected by personal preferences and learning styles. Those who prefer "book" learning, versus hands-on or learning through verbal exchange with others may be more likely to use the website. Similarly, those who value learning from the experiences of others may be inclined to use the listserv. We know from the analysis of the use of the listserv that many users prefer to "listen" rather than post a message to the group, while others regularly post messages. Some users may find posting a message to the listserv akin to speaking in front of a group.
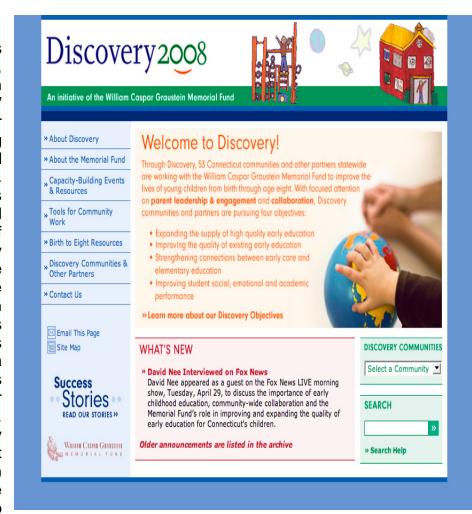
Access to technology and comfort with technology also impact the use of electronic communications tools. Discovery community collaborative members vary greatly in terms of their exposure to and comfort with technology as well as their access and usage of computers and the Internet.

The introductory section of this report offers a description and background information on each of the electronic communications tools—the Discovery website, listserv and weekly Digest. Highlights of major findings from analyses of usage data and interviews with community coordinators are then listed, followed by some implications for the Discovery initiative with regard to the electronic communications strategies. This section ends with a brief description of methods by which data for the report were collected. Detailed findings are found at the end of the report.

DESCRIPTION OF EACH TOOL

The Discovery Website

The Discovery website has five main components. First, each community has its own individual community "page" which includes subpages for describing their work, sharing contact information and highlighting work products. Each page also includes community-level data and (recently) a fiscal scan of investments in early childhood services. The community pages were intended to provide an opportunity for communities to see what their colleagues are working on and provide a public "face" for communities to use as part of their communications efforts. However, the community pages do have a consistent look and are branded with the Discovery logo. Some communities have also chosen to develop their own locally branded website.

Communities provide most of the content that is included on their pages. They also have the ability to personalize the pages by providing graphics or images and links to partner organizations.

Early on the Memorial Fund needed to decide whether community products should be put through a screening or quality assurance process or posted on the site "as is." The question became whether this was to be primarily a teaching tool or primarily a sharing tool. The decision was made that the website was to be a sharing tool, with users being left to decide the usefulness of a particular piece for themselves.

The second main component of the website is general information about the Discovery initiative, including a capacity building events calendar, information about the Discovery objectives and the initiative evaluation and success stories

from the field. We know from our analysis of the use of the website that users have accessed the Discovery website to learn about the initiative and the work of the Memorial Fund.

The third component of the website is an archive of capacity building events and resources provided throughout the initiative. Here users can find handouts and presentations and, in some cases, audio recordings of presentations offered at the various capacity building workshops.

The fourth component of the website is a selection of reports, fact sheets and resources related to early learning topics such as the achievement gap, child development, childcare, facilities, children's health, early learning and transition to kindergarten. This section also includes community examples of transition to kindergarten strategies and materials.

The final component of the website is a warehouse of research, toolkits and resources related to the topics of collaboration, parent leadership and engagement, community building, communications and data collection. This section also includes a sample of community generated reports, outreach and communications materials, research, toolkits and many other tools.

The Discovery Listserv

The Discovery listserv was originally set up as a communications tool for Discovery community collaborative members only, where they could "speak" to each other and share insights and materials on topics of immediate interest to them.[1] Memorial Fund staff and a few Memorial Fund consultants were subscribed to the listserv as "listeners" (and were asked not to post or respond to messages). In 2007, after gaining the approval of the community listserv membership via an online survey, fourteen statewide and regional grantees were invited to subscribe.   Seven of the fourteen organizations chose to subscribe.
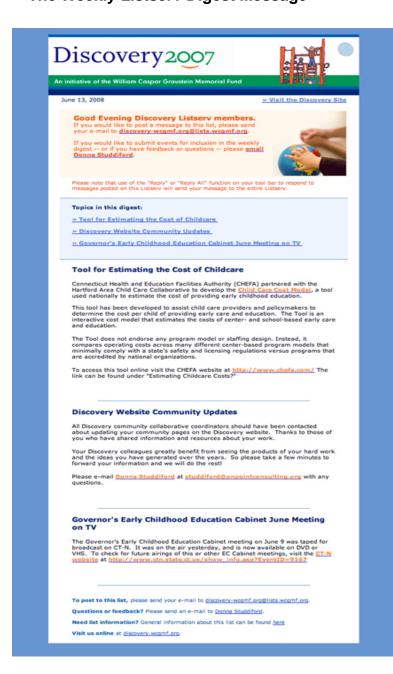
All members are restricted as to the nature of the information they are able to post on the Discovery listserv. Users are not able to use the listserv to support or oppose political candidates in an election or for lobbying purposes because of the restrictions imposed by the Internal Revenue Service on 501(c)(3) organizations such as the Memorial Fund. Communities are therefore not able to post "call to action" kinds of messages that are defined as lobbying.

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[1]   A listserv was set up in May 2008 for the Discovery liaisons to provide an opportunity for them to "stay connected" between meetings.

The Weekly Listserv Digest Message

A weekly newsletter was created when the website was launched to highlight items on the Discovery website, upcoming events, articles and briefs of interest in the field and work that is going on in the communities and through the statewide and regional grantees. This newsletter highlights three items each week, most often including resources such as toolkits, articles, publications, reports and policy briefs. Events sponsored by statewide and regional grantees and community collaborative groups, as well as webinars and other events hosted by statewide and national funders and organizations are also regularly included.

The Digest is also used to highlight areas on the Discovery website and communicate upcoming Discovery events and connect users to local, state and national resources and organizations.[2]

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[2]   The positive reaction to this tool has led to the creation of a similar monthly message in April 2008 to inform and update the Memorial Fund Board of Trustees.

Coordination, Moderation, and Technical Assistance

From the onset, the Memorial Fund supported the electronic communications strategy by hiring a consultant to moderate the listserv, update the Discovery website and generate the weekly digest message. Staff saw this work as needing constant attention and a central point of contact for collecting and disseminating information and knew that engaging the collaborative members would require ongoing support. The consultant provides this regular attention, while staff remain in the role of reviewing and approving content and format changes.

HIGHLIGHTS OF MAJOR FINDINGS

As described in more detail in the Methodology section below, the evaluation has drawn from three major sources of information about community use of these electronic tools – a review of postings and responses on the listserv between 2003 and 2007, an on-line survey of listserv members conducted in June 2007, and interviews with community coordinators conducted in mid-2007.

The Discovery Website

- Almost all of the community coordinators and others in the interviews (91 percent) were aware of the Discovery website and have visited it at some point. Most of the interviewees (about 75 percent) described themselves as somewhat or very familiar with the website and were able to give concrete examples of how they have used the site.

- In many communities (71 percent), the website was used to find out about the work of other Discovery communities, get contact information for coordinators and access materials posted by other communities. About half of the interviewees (48 percent) reported that they use it to find information on specific topics.

- Most of the interviewees (84 percent) did not identify any particular barrier to using the website. Eight interviewees who did mention a barrier talked about limited time and/or information overload. Four interviewees found it difficult to find what they were looking for on the website.

- About two thirds of the interviewees provided a general assessment of the website's ease of use. Of those, all thought it was either "quite easy" (19 of 28 respondents) or "pretty easy" (9 of 28 respondents) to use.

- When asked for ways that the website might be improved, a few (4 respondents) said they would like to see more updated postings from communities on their pages. A few (4 respondents) also mentioned that they would like to see community information organized by topic, so they

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can see what all communities have contributed in a particular area such as kindergarten transition activities.

The Discovery Listserv

- In most communities (84 percent), at least one collaborative member was subscribed to the listserv.

- Many communities (81 percent) have not posted to the listserv on a regular basis, but most communities (85 percent) have posted a message at some point since 2003 and most (64 percent) feel that it is a useful tool.[3]

- There are many more regular "responders" than regular "posters." On average, 17 communities (36 percent) posted a message each year and 21 (45 percent) responded. Only five of the "responding" communities responded only once, whereas ten of the "posting" communities posted only once. Usage frequency was fairly consistent in 2004, 2005 and 2006, and then dropped in 2007.

- The messages posted by communities between 2004 and 2007 fell into 5 main categories: requests for information (73 postings), information about events (41 postings), information sharing (38 postings), job postings (23 postings), and requests for a specific action (such as requests that communities participate in an event or process, distribute a survey, etc…) (12 postings).

- Messages that requested information received a response on the listserv from at least one other community almost 80 percent of the time and they often received responses from multiple communities.

- When asked to describe how the information on the listserv has been helpful to the Discovery work in their community, participants particularly valued the ability to find out about the work in other communities (52 percent) and to exchange information with other communities (36 percent).

- Most interviewees (71 percent) did not identify any particular barrier to using the listserv. Those who did identify a barrier noted the information on the listserv was not relevant to their work (18 percent or 8 respondents), and/or there is too much traffic on the listserv and/or too much information (14 percent).

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[3]   Only sixty-four percent of the interviewees responded to this question. So, all that responded feel that the listserv is a useful tool.

Weekly Listserv Digest Message

- Almost half of the interview respondents (46 percent) spontaneously mentioned that they use and appreciate the weekly digest message. A few (14 percent) archive the messages for later use and a few forward the messages to others in their collaborative. Some interviewees (27 percent) reported that they have gone to the Discovery website from the weekly digest message.

- Most of the online survey respondents (81 percent) also reported that they had learned new ideas from the weekly digest message that they have used in their work on behalf of young children.

- Interviewees appreciated the shortness of the message and that it is limited to 3 items that can be quickly perused. More than one quarter of the interviewees mentioned that there is always something on the digest they can use. A few interviewees (9 percent) used the information from the digest for their own community newsletter.

Coordination, Moderation, and Technical Assistance

Some communities have taken advantage of the services of the consultant working on the website and listserv. For example, some communities (26 of 47) send updates of their work for inclusion on the Discovery website. Two trainings have been offered to communities interested in updating their community pages on the website. Five communities attended the first training and two attended the second. One coordinator received the training remotely, using webinar technology. Three communities are currently using their community page on the Discovery website as their collaborative's website and use the community interface tool to make regular updates to their community pages.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

- Community collaboratives use the electronic communications tools primarily to learn about the work of and connect with peer Discovery communities. For the tools to be very useful for this purpose, communities need to support them by sharing their work on the website and using the listserv. Currently, communities are inconsistent in sharing their resources and though they are typically very responsive to messages that are posted on the listserv, they are less likely to use the listserv to obtain information.

  o The Memorial Fund may want to provide more structured support around community sharing by committing staff or consultant time to routinely collecting and sharing community stories and updates.
  o Liaisons may be a resource for encouraging communities to share their information via the website and listserv, but may need more

information and training to know how to "sell" these tools in their communities.

- The weekly listserv digest is valued as a useful and informative resource. Since it is regularly used and referenced by community and statewide grantees, it may provide a useful vehicle for reinforcing certain key messages.

- Statewide organizations were invited to participate on the listserv as of October 2007. As of the end of 2007, statewide grantees did not appear to be using the listserv to make connections with the communities around their work, but it may become a tool for strengthening connections between statewide grantees and Discovery communities going forward.

- Since the Memorial Fund first launched the electronic communications tools, use of these kinds of tools and even e-mail has grown considerably. Now there are also many more wireless, non-PC tools that are commonly used. Internet access and the use of e-mail, as well as the ability to share documents more widely (based, in part on the proliferation of and access to Adobe Acrobat) have become a "given." Users are much more likely to be on a listserv and the Internet has become an even more generally accepted way to share information. This, along with the other supports intended to build the capacity of the communities may result in an increase in the use and value of these tools as the initiative moves forward.

METHODOLOGY

The main source of information about the Discovery website was the telephone interviews conducted in the summer of 2007 with community coordinators and sometimes additional members of the Discovery collaborative group. All but two of the 47 Discovery community collaboratives were represented. Though others in the community may use the electronic communications tools in very different ways from the interviewees, this report assumes that coordinator access to the electronic tools implies community access.

An archive of messages posted on the Discovery listserv provided data on community usage of the listserv, in addition to findings from the telephone interviews described above. An interview with Nancy Leonard, the Memorial Fund staff person responsible for communications and policy work, provided background and history on the development of the tools and expectations for their use.

An online survey of listserv users on listserv usage and preferences was conducted in June 2007. Thirty-eight (38) communities responded to the survey

distributed through the listserv. Their responses provided supplemental data on how Discovery communities use and view the website and listserv.

DETAILED FINDINGS

The Discovery Website

Knowledge and use of the website

Most community interviewees (91 percent) had used the website at least once. About 75 percent of those interviewed described themselves as somewhat or very familiar with the website and were able to give concrete examples of how they used the site. Use of the website seems to be sporadic. As one interviewee put it, "I use it in bursts when I am looking for something or researching something or curious about what others are doing."

Almost three-quarters (71 percent) of the interviewees said they used the website to find out what other Discovery communities were doing, get contact information for coordinators and access materials posted by other communities. They may have been looking generally at the work of other communities or looking for specific tools that could be adapted for use in their own community. Almost half (48 percent) of the interviewees used the site to find information on specific topics. About one-third (34 percent) used the website to get examples of collaborative forms and procedures (job descriptions, by-laws, etc.). Just over one-fifth (21 percent) of the interviewees visited the website to view the Discovery calendar or download forms.   Another 21 percent visited the site to get background information on the Discovery initiative or the Memorial Fund.

Barriers to use of the website

Interviewees were asked about the ease in using the website and whether they find the site easy or difficult to use. About two thirds of the interviewees provided a general assessment of the website's ease of use. Of those, all thought it was either "quite easy" (19 of 28) or "pretty easy" (9 of 28) to use.

Most (84 percent) did not mention any particular barrier to using the site. Of the 16 percent that did mention a barrier, some (8 respondents) referred to limited time and/or information overload. Four reported that it was difficult to find what they wanted on the site.

Only a few interviewees had any specific suggestions for improving the website. Four participants said they would like to see more updated postings from communities on their pages. Four also mentioned that they would like to see community information organized by topic, so they can see what all communities have posted in a particular area.

The Discovery Listserv

Knowledge and Use of the Listserv

The listserv was launched at the end of 2003. From the launch through the end of 2007, a total of 852 messages have been posted. Of those, there have been 187 "original" messages posted by a community seeking or sharing information. Postings that request a response typically receive multiple responses.

Of those interviewed, 88 percent of the communities reported that at least one of the interview respondents (usually the coordinator) was subscribed to the Discovery on the listserv.

Forty (85 percent) communities have posted messages to the listserv since it was launched. Most (38 or 81 percent of the total) posted infrequently (1 to 10 times over the course of the initiative). Two posted more regularly (12 and 35 times). Forty-two (89 percent) communities responded to messages posted to the listserv by another subscriber. There were many more "regular" responders than "regular" posters. Four communities posted more than 10 responses and only five responded only once, whereas ten communities posted only one original message. On average, 17 (36 percent) communities posted a message each year and 21 (45 percent) responded. Usage frequency was fairly consistent in 2004, 2005 and 2006, and then dropped in 2007.

When communities posted requests for information, the user who posted a message received a response on the listserv from at least one other community almost 80 percent of the time. (Of the 73 "request for information" messages posted, 57 received responses.) This may be an undercount of response since there are likely to have been situations in which a responder sent a message directly to the person who posted the message rather than posting it to the entire listserv.

Usefulness of the Listserv

Sixty-four percent (64 percent)[4] of the community coordinators mentioned that information on the listserv had been helpful to the Discovery work in their community.   When asked to describe what specifically was useful to the work, more than half (52 percent) reported that it was finding out what other communities were doing. More than one third (36 percent) said the listserv was helpful in providing a vehicle for information exchange with other communities. About one quarter (27 percent) mentioned forwarding information from the listserv to other collaborative members. Fourteen percent (14 percent) became connected to organizations in the state through the listserv.

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[4]   Only sixty-four percent of the interviewees responded to this question. So, all that responded feel that the listserv is a useful tool.

Listserv members were asked to respond to a survey about listserv usage and preferences. The survey asked respondents whether they had learned any new ideas from the listserv that they have used in their work on behalf of young children. Of the thirty-seven (37) responses, more than half (21) said they had. Examples included: by-laws and collaborative governance tools, job descriptions, ideas for a community survey, and parent engagement strategies. One respondent said, "Many times when other communities ask questions, they are the same questions that I might have and I am always interested in the responses from other communities."

Seventy-one percent of those interviewed did not mention any barriers to using the listserv. Of the remaining interviewees, 18 percent (8) did not feel the information on the listserv is relevant to their work. Fourteen percent felt there is too much traffic on the listserv and/or too much information. Seven percent (7 percent) reported being intimidated by technology.

Content of Messages Posted

The messages posted by communities between 2004 and 2007 fell into 5 main categories: Requests for information (73 postings or 39 percent of all community postings), information about events (41 postings or 22 percent), information sharing (38 postings or 20 percent), job postings (23 postings or 12 percent), and requests for a specific action (12 postings or 6 percent).

Requests for information (73 postings) include postings requesting information from other listserv members. The types of requests for information include:

- Requests for information on how a program is implemented or a specific issue is handled in other communities or general questions about how to approach a problem or issue and/or where to find information (42 or 57 percent).
- Requests for an existing tools, templates or approaches that other communities have already developed and used (27 or 37 percent).
- Requests for a referral for a particular person such as a speaker, consultant or web designer (4 or 5 percent).

Information about events (41 postings) included postings for events sponsored or hosted by the Discovery collaborative as well as events organized by other groups.

Information sharing (38 postings) includes instances where users posted information to share with the group.   The types of information sharing messages posted include:

- Sharing an article or report or an announcement about a new resource or information about something that is going on in the field. (26 or 68 percent)
- Sharing information about a new tool, report or resource that the community has developed or sharing the details of a particular success or achievement. (12 or 32 percent)

Job postings (23 postings) included postings for available jobs within the Discovery collaborative as well as jobs in the field.

Requests for specific action (12 postings) included requests that communities participate in an event, requests for parent participants for a study and parents and teachers to be interviewed for a news article, requests from a community to work with others on public awareness campaigns or other statewide efforts, and requests to distribute and participate in surveys.

Weekly Listserv Digest Message

The Digest was developed to highlight key information and interviewees appreciate the shortness of the message and that it is limited to 3 items that can be quickly perused. More than one quarter of the community coordinators interviewed in mid-2007 mentioned that there is always something on the Digest they can use. Twenty-one percent (21 percent) found the listserv Digest useful because it highlighted what was available on the Discovery website. Nine percent use the information from the Digest for their own community newsletter.

Though no questions were specifically asked during the coordinator interviews about the weekly Digest message, it was spontaneously mentioned by almost half of the respondents (46 percent). Fourteen percent said they archived the Digest messages for later use. More than one quarter (27 percent) of interviewees reported going to the Discovery website from the Digest.

Most (81 percent) of the listserv members responding to the listserv survey reported that they had learned new ideas from the weekly Digest message that they have used in their work on behalf of young children. One respondent said, "The listserv [Digest] has sparked ideas and conversation in our community." Examples of particular information that was seen as useful included ideas for marketing of Discovery work in the community, parent engagement strategies, transition to kindergarten information, tools for children and families, and state and national reports, articles, research and data.