# On Collaborative Governance

## John Donahue

Raymond Vernon Lecturer in Public Policy
Director, Weil Program on Collaborative Governance
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

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# Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative

The Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government is a multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder program that seeks to study and enhance the public contributions of private enterprise. It explores the intersection of corporate responsibility, corporate governance and strategy, public policy, and the media. It bridges theory and practice, builds leadership skills, and supports constructive dialogue and collaboration among different sectors. It was founded in 2004 with the support of Walter H. Shorenstein, Chevron Corporation, The Coca-Cola Company, and General Motors.

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# For Further Information

Further information on the Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative can be obtained from the Program Coordinator, Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative, Harvard Kennedy School, 79 JFK Street, Mailbox 82, Cambridge, MA 02138, telephone (617) 495-1446, telefax (617) 496-5821, email CSRI@ksg.harvard.edu.

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*The essence of Collaborative Governance is a new level of social/political engagement between and among the several sectors of society that constitutes a more effective way to address many of modern societies' needs beyond anything that the several sectors have heretofore been able to achieve on their own. Our sense of the increase of this phenomenon led us to believe this subject needed to be systematically explored.*

*-Frank A. and Denie S. Weil, Program Benefactors*

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The Weil Program on Collaborative Governance departs from the proposition that a large and growing fraction of the capacity required to create public value exists outside government narrowly defined. This "distributed" capacity can include financial resources, skilled personnel, physical assets, managerial capabilities, information, and even trust and legitimacy. The outside reservoirs of such capacity include both profit-seeking firms and non-profit organizations.

The engagement of non-governmental actors in the pursuit of public missions is by no means new. But it is becoming more important for several reasons:

- First, and most obvious, is the fact that a large part of the world's population lives in areas where the formal state is weak.
- The second reason is widespread loss of confidence in the mid-20th-century version of the centralized state.
- The third, subtlest, and perhaps most important reason is that a growing fraction of collective tasks in a complex, interconnected, information-dense world – knit together and energized by powerful market forces – simply cannot be accomplished (well, or at all) by government acting alone.

When government is responsible for a mission that depends upon external capacity, there are several ways to engage that capacity. One way is to require entities outside government to play their parts, through mandates, regulations, or other means of imposing obligations. Another is to induce them to participate through contracts, grants, tax incentives, or other means. The Weil Program is concerned with a third approach – collaboration. Firms, non-profit organizations, and other external agents work to advance a collective goal not because they are forced to do so or paid to do so, but because participation advances their own interests as well. Collaboration may be linked to mandated and to induced cooperation (both conceptually and in practice). But our working premise is that collaboration is distinguishable theoretically and empirically; an important category of collective action; and under-examined relative to its importance.

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# Observations On Taxonomy

Where does collaborative governance fit within the sprawling spectrum of models for structuring collective action? Taxonomy is among the most instinctive, and the most treacherous, of human activities. Both the task itself, and its hazards, may be most visible on taxonomy's home turf of biology.

Consider, for example, the problem of classifying furry herbivores with longish ears, a hopping gait, impressive fecundity, and anxious dispositions. The description holds for rabbits, hares, coneys, pikas, African hyraxes, and (less precisely) for kangaroos, wallabies, and a number of other animals. Should we consider this collection to be an integral category, or simply as disparate instances of convergent evolution toward what is, after all, a pretty sensible design for creatures a little ways down the food chain? And if it *is* a distinctive class, what niche does it fill within the animal kingdom? The ancient Hebrews lumped rabbits with camels, as ruminants with uncloven feet and hence not kosher.[1] Linnaeus, the father of modern biology, categorized rabbits and their ilk with rodents, based on similarities of dentition and diet. In the 20th century the distinguished taxonomist George Gaylord Simpson also linked rabbits and rodents, though he conceded that this designation was "permitted by our ignorance rather than sustained by our knowledge."[2] Amherst biologist Albert E. Wood framed one of the more plaintive titles in the hard sciences for his mid-century *Evolution* article "What, If Anything, Is a Rabbit?"[3] Many of Wood's colleagues took up his question in subsequent decades, with inconclusive results. (Only with the advent of DNA analysis did scientists learn that rabbits are less related to rodents than they are to whales, and share recent ancestry with the primates.[4] The rabbit turns out to be far removed from the squirrel, in other words, but a rather close cousin to you.)

Classifying collaborative governance is at least as tricky. If we take "governance" to mean nothing more than the orchestration of collective activity, and adopt a moderately permissive view of "collaboration," the term (dictatorships excepted) is almost a tautology. A definition that affords some conceptual traction must be imposed on the phrase, not distilled from it. This poses the choice of how broadly collaborative governance should be defined, and there are dangers at each extreme. To briefly resume the life-sciences metaphor, the phrase "collaborative governance" is a little like the phrase "biological interdependence." Cast it too broadly and you have conceptually flabby circle-of-life pieties. Cast it too narrowly and you have the lichen--fungi and algae fused into a single structure and collaborating for dear life[5] – which is cleanly defined but not really all that interesting.[6]

The operating definition of collaborative governance for now, as implied by initial discussions and the first wave of research projects, is closer to the circle-of-life end of the spectrum – some amalgam of public, private, and civil-society organizations engaged in some joint effort. This is entirely appropriate for the ground-clearing stage of a program, but we need to gain more specificity in the next phase. How can we build some boundaries and impose precision without ending up in obscurity or marginal relevance? One way to anchor the phrase is to read "governance" as fundamentally public. That is, governance is not something that transcends plain old "government"; governance is what government does (though not always directly or on its own.) The orchestration of collective action with essentially individualistic

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[1] Deuteronomy 14:7. This definition underscores that one's choice of taxonomic principles hinge on the purpose to be served by the classification system. If the goal is to draw a bright line between kosher and trayfe, it may be entirely sensible to lump rabbits with camels.

[2] Simpson is quoted in Jerold M. Lowenstein, "Counterpoints in Science," *Discovery*, Summer 1996

[3] Albert E. Wood, "What, If Anything, Is a Rabbit?" *Evolution*, Vol. XI, no. 4, December 1957

[4] Daniel Graur, Laurent Duretl, and Marolo Gouy, "Phylogenetic position of the order Lagomorpha (rabbits, hare and allies)" *Nature* no. 379, 1996. Hyraxes and all the marsupial look-alikes, by the way, are of entirely different lineages.

[5] Technically the other partner with the fungus can be cyanobacteria as well as algae. The cyanobacteria used to be called blue-green algae, but it turns out they aren't. This datum and all you need to know about lichens can be found on the website of the International Association of Lichenology, a transnational NGO heretofore neglected in the collaborative governance literature. http://www.botany.hawaii.edu/cpsu/assoc.html

[6] For the record, the IAL points out that the lichen is the dominant life-form on eight percent of Earth's land surface, although these tend to be the places with the fewest humans around to admire the lichens.

goals – however valuable, however far-flung and intricate – is something different. (This is a difficult distinction to draw, of course, since "publicness" is defined in part by reference to the capacities and shortfalls of market-based collective action, introducing some circularity into the definition of governance.) Yet on balance it seems essential, in terms of practical boundary-setting, to stipulate a common mission, and the involvement of the public sector, as a definitional requirement for collaborative governance.

Beyond this still somewhat ill-formed boundary condition there are many potential dimensions along which collaborative governance can be defined, and by which specific examples can be categorized. Eight of the more obvious are listed here.

- **Formality** – A collaborative relationship can be institutionalized through formal contracts (or the equivalent) or it can operate through informal agreements or even tacit understandings. As research and discussion advances, a certain minimum of formality seems increasingly imperative. While collaborations cemented solely by gentlemen's agreements and implicit cultural codes may be important, they are hard to recognize or analyze. A degree of formalism at least sufficient to permit objective descriptions of participants, procedures, and goals is necessary to distinguish collaborative governance from other categories of public-private interaction.

- **Duration** – At one extreme are governance arrangements meant to be permanent (or at least indefinitely enduring); at the other extreme are *ad hoc* collaborations that dissolve as soon as a crisis is resolved or a goal achieved. Other things being equal, long-lived collaborations seem more consequential, and hence more worthy of study.

- **Focus** – Collaboration can be narrowly structured to meet a single shared challenge, or can be more broadly designed to address a range of concerns common (whether simultaneously or sequentially) to the collaborating parties. (Single-purpose collaborations are likely to be more analytically tractable, but collaborations with richer agendas may be more interesting.)

- **Institutional Diversity** – A minimum level of diversity among participating institutions – at least one public and one private player – is the price of entry for collaborative governance. But beyond this baseline, collaborations can display a greater or lesser degree of internal diversity. A joint effort among "summit" institutions within a single country (the Federal government, Wal-Mart, and the United Way in the U.S., for example) features less diversity than, say, a collaboration among the Calcutta municipal authorities, Toshiba, and *Medecins sans Frontiers.*

- **"Valence"** – A better term is needed than this one, borrowed from chemistry, to refer to the number of distinct players linked together in a collaboration and the number of links among them. Whatever the terminology, it seems wise to limit the number of individual players that can be involved for an arrangement to meet the definition. Otherwise it may be impossible to draw a meaningful distinction between "collaborative governance," networks in general, and even plain old pluralism.[7]

- **Stability versus Volatility** – A collaboration is *stable* to the extent its members share a normative view of successful governance, and *volatile* to the extent members' norms or interests diverge. The less stable is the collaboration, the larger the share of its energies must be devoted to maintaining the collaboration itself.

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[7] A spin-off of the scholarly work on business alliances deals with "constellations," or collaborations among a large number of firms. (Candace Jones *et al.,* "Professional Service Constellations: How Strategies and Capabilities Influence Collaborative Stability and Change," *Organization Science* Vol. 9, No. 3, 1998) It seems as if the complexities would be considerably greater in accounting for parallel phenomena in governance.

- **Initiative** – Which collaborating institution(s) instigated the joint effort, and what is the allocation of initiative among the parties for defining goals, assessing results, triggering adjustment, and so on?  In other words, who is leveraging whom?  On this criterion I have fairly strong views, and incline toward a three-part test.  First, to count as collaborative *governance,* a large and even dominant share of the initiative must rest with a player holding a plausible claim to represent the broad public interest.   In a reasonably well-functioning democracy, authorized units of government should have the final word on the objectives to be pursued and the criteria by which progress is to be assessed.[8]  Where government is absent, weak, or undemocratic (not a clean criterion, I recognize) this condition is unrealistic, and even in the general case may be controversial.[9]   Second, each of the collaborating parties must have *some* role in setting the goals of the collaboration.  If the other parties are simply agents engaged to implement the dominant player's agenda, the relationship is something other than collaborative governance.  Third, the relationship among the parties must be strategic, in the sense that each acts with an eye to the others and anticipates that the others will respond to its own behavior.  In other words, arms-length interactions where the government role is limited to setting "the rules of the game," or where the private role is limited to providing goods and services on a purely market basis, don't count.

  There may well turn out to be a significant distinction between the domestic US and international variants of collaborative governance on this point.  It seems likely that the prevalence of collaborative arrangements within a political culture follows a U-shaped trajectory with respect to the robustness and sophistication of formal government.  Where democratic institutions are weak or sparse--in feeble or failed states, or in many areas of international relations--collaborations emerge as stopgaps.  As formal government develops to occupy more of the terrain for collection action, but remains rigid and jealous of its authority, there is little room for collaboration.  Finally, as governments grow sophisticated and secure enough to experiment with more finely tuned approaches to governance, collaborations once again proliferate.

- **Problem-driven versus Opportunity-driven**   Is the collaboration primarily "defensive" – devoted to solving or ameliorating some joint threat – or primarily "offensive," meant to pursue a shared opportunity?  That is, is the success of collaborative governance defined as maintaining, or as improving upon, the *status quo*?

This array of distinguishing attributes is tentative, of course, and will likely be refined or even largely replaced following further work.   Something comparable to the list is certainly needed, however, both to bound the field and to distinguish among different kinds of collaboration *within* the boundaries.  An equally important (though longer-term) function for an array of discriminate characteristics is to frame a rubric for assessment.  Since the answer to the question "does collaborative governance work?" is almost certainly "it depends," we will need a disciplined array of conditions and characteristics on which it depends.

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[8] This is analogous to Khanna's distinction between "common benefits" and "private benefits" in an corporate alliance, and (in those terms) can be restated as requiring that either common benefits must predominate or else the governmental partner must collect the majority of "private benefits," and collect them in a form valued by the citizenry. Tarun Khanna, "The Scope of Alliances," *Organization Science* Vol. 9, No. 3, 1988

[9] Consider a California ballot initiative in which a well-funded interest group employs for-profit polling, signature-gathering, and political advertising firms to enact a law that government simply enforces.  This is a pretty interesting phenomenon, to be sure, but something that in my view falls outside a workable definition of collaborative governance.

# Toward an Agenda

There are at least four overlapping but distinguishable kinds of work to be done on collaborative governance – conceptual, empirical, evaluative, and operational.

## Conceptual

One conceivable version of a conceptual agenda would be to develop a unified theory of collaborative governance that integrates and transcends related work underway in political science, economics, public administration, sociology, organization theory, and other fields. This is almost certainly infeasible. But neither is it necessary. A more pragmatic conceptual agenda starts with a disciplined effort to define collaborative governance and to anchor it within a taxonomy of collective-action models. The next stage centers on harvesting and adapting tools and concepts from related scholarly traditions.

## Empirical

The discussion of collaborative governance is prone to an intellectual analogue of inflation--too many ideas chasing too few facts. Building a solid evidentiary base is an essential prerequisite to coherent research and effective practice. That said, assembling an empirical base will be a protracted and challenging effort. It will clearly involve some mix of "micro-empiricism" (case studies) and "macro-empiricism" (statistics) and there are real challenges with each.

Assembling case studies is not hard, of course. The trick is in selecting the cases and processing them so that they aggregate toward meaningful evidence that will support generalization and inform testable propositions. A tight definition of collaborative governance is necessary, but not sufficient, to get this done. We also need to develop some systematic way for selecting cases to be studied. This means, among other things, resisting the temptation to persuade ourselves that the cases that are easy to study, or the cases we want to study for other purposes, are the ones that give us the best purchase on collaborative governance.

With respect to "macro-empiricism," there are many baseline questions about aggregate patterns and broad trends that should be addressed. How many collaborative efforts among government, business, and civil-society entities are actually underway? How many people are involved in these collaborations? What proportion of government spending is channeled through such ventures? What share of rules and regulations are framed, influenced, or implemented collaboratively? How do these indicators vary across sectors and between countries? And how, if at all, are they changing over time?

Unfortunately, we have essentially no clue as to the answers to these questions, even in the densely documented United States. The official statistics simply aren't collected or organized with an eye to illuminating collaborative governance. Data assembled by the Commerce Department's Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis, and by the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics, give excellent snapshots of the headcount and payroll for the public sector and (with a remarkable degree of sectoral precision) for the private sector. But there is no systematic distinction between for-profit and non-profit private organizations, and no category at all for "collaborations" in the tabulation of labor data. Federal budget numbers prepared by the Office of Management and Budget array, in great detail, the torrent of grant money to state and local governments. But there is no comprehensive map of this fiscal river further downstream to track its flow to private, non-profit, and governmental organizations, let alone collaborations among them. The Federal Procurement Data system maintained by the General Services Administration records government contracts with large firms, small businesses in general, businesses (both large and small) located in urban enterprise zones, businesses owned by women, economically disadvantaged people, Native Americans, other ethic minorities, veterans in general and disabled veterans in particular. It also tracks contracts with non-profit organizations. But there is no separate category

for contracts with collaborative entities, or with firms and non-profits engaged in collaboration. At the international level, even rudimentary facts such as the number of entities in each sector are unknown. (On the global total of non-governmental organizations, for example, the best that the estimable Don Kettl could do was to suggest that they "surely number in the millions."[10])

Even if further probing confirms that the existing statistical landscape is as sparely populated as it appears to be, it should prove possible to cobble together a respectable empirical base over time. Carefully structured surveys could be useful, for example. It may prove possible to re-process existing data series, such as the Federal procurement material, to tease out valid indicators of the scale and trajectory of collaborative approaches. We should be as creative and as opportunistic as possible in assembling relevant statistics. But we should also be realistic about the challenge this presents. Paul Light not long ago undertook a major statistical project to estimate the number of non-Federal employees engaged in indirect Federal production--a much easier job than measuring inter-sectoral collaborations--with not-terribly-convincing results.[11] Patience, creativity, and (especially) humility are the appropriate watchwords for this aspect of the empirical effort.

## Evaluative

A major motive to study collaborative governance is to determine "what works" in order to celebrate and replicate success. But determining what works in collaborative governance requires defining "collaborative governance" but also (and more challenging) defining "works." We require a robust enough normative framework to calibrate outcomes. This is obviously a major challenge (indeed, ultimately not conducive to full resolution) on the aggregate, abstract level and also (less obviously) in individual cases. (A collaborative social-service program involving faith-based organizations, for example, might be counted successful by some measures if service delivery is ruthlessly stripped of religious overtones, and by other measures if it is rich with religious content.)

There are three increasingly stringent definitions of "working" for collaborative governance. The least demanding requirement is simple existence – actors from across the sectors form a collaborative undertaking that continues in operation for some minimum period of time. The second level involves meeting the organizational imperatives of the entities directly involved in the collaboration.[12] The third, most stringent, and ultimately most important definition of "working" requires the collaboration to outperform feasible alternative arrangements in the creation of value for the citizenry as a whole. Consider the collaborative governance undertaken by the (governmental) Securities and Exchange Commission, the (non-profit) Financial Accounting Standards Board, and (for-profit) accounting firms. For many decades, this met tolerably well the demanding third definition of "working;" for a period starting sometime in the 1990s it met the second but (in many cases) not the third; and it is possible that it will soon cease to meet the first.

Irreducible ambiguities about social value make the third level of evaluation endlessly debatable, of course, though a pragmatically oriented program on collaborative governance will learn how and when to draw a line under the debate. As the Weil Program matures, and as the evaluative component expands, we will get more sophisticated about assessment. But even at the start, we can be clear about which definition of "working" is being applied. And, again, we should be wary of the hazards involved in evaluation, which include: the risk of bias due to the way cases are selected;

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[10] Kettl, "The Transformation of Governance: Globalization, Devolution, and the Role of Government," *Public Administration Review* November/December 2000, Vol. 60, no. 6, p. 491

[11] Paul Light, *The True Size of Government* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999)

[12] The first and second definitions might be seen as the same, since if a collaboration didn't meet participants' needs it wouldn't endure. But a collaboration producing no net value could operate, at least for a while, through inertia, through myopia or misperception on its members' part, or through cycling through a shifting cast of members.

the potentially very large number of variables that could explain success or failure[13]; the difficulty (absent a robust empirical base and rigorous methods) in isolating generalizable success factors; the likely improvement or decay in performance over time that makes point assessments treacherous; and so on.

An additional reason for approaching evaluation with special caution is the widespread instinct that collaboration is, by and large, a good thing--especially in weak nations or international settings that tend toward states of nature. This may tempt us to score as successful any collaboration that hangs together, gets things done, and declares its devotion to the public good.[14] Experience with the related phenomenon of corporate alliances is instructive in this regard. Early work on inter-firm collaboration was weighted toward abstract theories about how alliances *formed*, with limited attention to their *outcomes*. Only after a dozen years or so, with a level of conceptual maturation and the revelation of experience well beyond what we now have for collaborative governance, did systematic evaluative studies begin to appear in the literature--and even the scholars who did those studies declare them to be highly tentative.[15] Meanwhile, the world is arguably poorer due to irrational exuberance about strategic alliances, virtual corporations, and the like. So we would be wise to avoid premature pronouncements about what works in collaborative governance, beware a tacit stance of "the more collaboration, the better," and accept that we will learn very little from the first handful of cases. Evaluative confidence will come, but only with time and effort.

## Operational

The fourth category of activity for the Weil Program is operational, though in a professional-school setting the more precise term might be "pedagogic." What, and how, should we teach our students (both degree and non-degree students) to equip them for useful roles in structures of collaborative governance?

This might seem to be a premature question, since the four types of activity appear linked in a logically linear sequence. (First conceptualize; then gather data; then determine what works; and only then think about teaching and operations.) But the very existence of professional education (particularly in law, business, and public policy) is a bet on the proposition that practical training can be useful even in domains riddled with hot disputes and unresolved questions.

Five years ago, for example, a module in basic finance and accounting was added, for the first time, to the Kennedy School's core curriculum. There were (and are) roiling debates about the right relationship between business and government; about the appropriateness of business methods and models in the public sector; about the proper weighting of financial and non-financial factors in public management; and even about the right way to do the accounting itself. These uncertainties notwithstanding, a critical mass of the faculty was persuaded that it was a good idea to give students some rudimentary familiarity with balance sheets and income statements before declaring them to be masters of public policy.

Similarly, it does not seem reckless to suggest that we will be able to identify skills, concepts, methods, terms, and habits of mind that can be conveyed in the classroom and that will improve students' ability to understand and operationalize collaborative governance, well before we settle some of the larger questions. Some of this material will be simple entry tickets into the discussion of collaborative governance – basic terms and facts analogous to the

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[13] That is, the answer to the question "what works?" will likely be framed in terms of "in what sectors, with what mix of organizational types, in what political and cultural settings, with what types of contracts and other associational devices, with what pattern of leadership, with what degree of complexity," and so on..

[14] An interesting commentary on a related issue can be found in Cynthia Hardy and Nelson Phillips, "Strategies of Engagement: Lessons from the Critical Examination of Collaboration and Conflict in an Interorganizational Domain" *Organization Science* Vol. 9, no. 2, March/April 1998

[15] For example, see Yves L. Doz "The Evolution of Cooperation in Strategic Alliances: Initial Conditions or Learning Processes?" *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 17, Special Issue: Evolutionary Perspectives on Strategy. (Summer, 1996), who closely examines, and tentatively evaluates, alliances between GE and European aircraft-engine maker SNECMA; between Ciba Geigy and Alza; and between AT&T and Olivetti.

accounting module.  More sophisticated material can include readings, cases, and exercises that illustrate for students how the general challenges of collaboration are manifest, and can be engaged in particular cases.

Collaborative-governance pedagogy may turn out to be organized around six categories of professional skills, each of which can be developed through a range of discipline-based and interdisciplinary training:

- **Appraisal** – calibrating the dimensions of a governance challenge and the defects of the *status quo* in the absence of collaborative efforts to address it;

- **Analysis** – appreciating, in a sophisticated way, the forces at work in the policy arena; identifying the incentives and predicting the behavior of the actors within it;

- **Assignment** – selecting the institutional players to be recruited into or tasked with a particular responsibility within a collaborative system (to the extent the organizational constellation is malleable);

- **Architecture** – designing a structure of information flows, financial relationships, and accountability arrangements with the best odds of focusing the collaboration's energies on real sources of public value;

- **Assessment** – evaluating the collaboration, to whatever level of precision permitted by the available data and the degree of normative clarity and consensus that exists;

- **Adjustment** – deploying formal or informal authority, guided by analysis and assessment, to fine-tune the structure, targeting, or operations of the collaboration.

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**John D. Donahue** is the Raymond Vernon Lecturer in Public Policy, director of the Weil Program on Collaborative Governance, and previously director of Visions of Governance for the 21st Century. His teaching, writing, and research mostly deal with public sector reform and with the distribution of public responsibilities across levels of government and sectors of the economy. He has written or edited nine books, including *Disunited States* (1997), *The Privatization Decision* (1989, with four translations 1990–92) and most recently, *For the People:  Can We Fix Public Service?* (co-edited with Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 2003). He served in the first Clinton Administration as an Assistant Secretary and then as Counselor to the Secretary of Labor. Donahue has consulted for business and governmental organizations, including the National Economic Council, the World Bank, and the RAND Corporation, and serves as a trustee or advisor to several nonprofits. A native of Indiana, he holds a BA from Indiana University and an MPP and PhD from Harvard.

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See also:

John D. Donahue and Richard J. Zeckhauser, "The Anatomy of Collaborative Governance," in progress for the *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, 2004

"Parks and Partnerships in New York City A:  Adrian Benepe's Challenge" 2003

"Parks and Partnerships in New York City B:  The Spectrum of Engagement" 2004