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The Role of the Practitioner in the Next Generation of Evidence

PROJECT
EVIDENT

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“We anchor on mission. [We are] not doing it for compliance and reporting, but because you want to be as good as you can be.”

Nonprofit Leader
Project Evident Survey, 2016

The Role of the Practitioner in the Next Generation of Evidence

In the next generation model for evidence building, we envision that practitioners become the drivers of their evidence agendas, equipped with the strategies, tools, and talent they need to rigorously evaluate their programs and strengthen outcomes for the communities they serve. We imagine an ecosystem less governed by power, misplaced incentives, and sluggish learning, and instead defined by a commitment to continuous evidence building, linking improvement to impact. We imagine that R&D is not just the privilege of the private sector, but common practice of the social sector. In order for this better world to exist, we must reassign agency to leaders doing work in the field, allowing them to take command of evidence-building practices in stronger alignment with researchers and policy makers and with support from like-minded funders.

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This is a tall order, likely to take years to realize. Yet the curve of change is tilting in this direction and with intentional effort, we can build on today’s promising use cases to accelerate enabling conditions for more nonprofits to embrace evidence-building practices tomorrow. This will require re-examining today’s status quo, encouraging behavior change on the part of funders, and most importantly, backing programmatic leaders who are driving for social impact.

An increased voice and more agency in evidence building is something practitioners have been asking for. In surveys and interviews with hundreds of nonprofit organizations between 2016 and 2018, Project Evident found that nonprofit leaders are highly motivated to understand the impact of their work on their communities, hungry for data and evaluation solutions that generate practical insights for program implementation and continuous improvement, and eager to learn from and connect with a community of their peers. Practitioners want to build evidence not just for accountability – in order to meet grant requirements or check off boxes for funders – but in order to provide better services and show that those services make a difference for the people they serve.



“In my way of thinking about evidence-based policy, the single most important player is the group of people who establish and run programs that actually deliver services. All politics might not be local but all program implementation is.”

Ron Haskins, Co-chair, U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

In this next generation, nonprofit leaders will work closely with researchers, funders, and policymakers to advance the building and use of evidence on a continuous basis and as a core part of their operations. Giving nonprofit leaders a seat at the table allows them to set research questions and methods relevant to their organizations – not just for researchers and policymakers. Practitioners are well-positioned to identify the most appropriate metrics, evaluation design, and analytic approaches to inform their operations and meet the needs of the people they serve. In the existing paradigm, the generally limited role for practitioners has resulted in studies where the research design doesn’t always match program context or the field’s evidence needs. This flawed approach to evidence building slows the potential pipeline of organizations with interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness and merit more investment. Therefore, increasing the practitioners’ role in developing evaluation strategies will also benefit the sector, increasing the diversity of perspectives and the number of programs ready for external evaluation and likely to achieve outcomes.

One example of a strong researcher-practitioner partnership is Year Up, a nonprofit that provides low-income young people with workforce training and support. In 2010, Year Up agreed to participate in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) as part of the Pathways to Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) evaluation and partnered with Abt Associates to implement the experiment. During the course of the work, staff from Year Up and Abt forged a close working partnership, with each organization contributing ideas and questions to the table. In a [blog post](#) on Abt’s website about the project, they outline the ingredients of a strong practitioner-researcher partnership, including emphasis on partnership from the outset, establishing a foundation for long-term collaboration, the inclusion of qualitative research, and having the external funding necessary to engage fully in the work.

Funders play an important role in supporting and developing social sector leaders – they want to support practitioners who serve communities well, and they are increasingly aware of issues of equity and power dynamics present in philanthropy. As practitioners are increasingly challenged with collecting and analyzing data to improve programs and outcomes, we envision public and private funders supporting community leaders in executing on their own learning agenda – a shift that may be disruptive in

the short term but that will ultimately lead to better outcomes for communities served.



"We need the runway to solve hard problems...(F)unding for data and evidence infrastructure would be huge!"

Nonprofit Leader
Project Evident Survey, 2016

Yet today, the data-for-evidence market remains skewed, with the bulk of funding going not to nonprofits for evidence building but to third-party research firms for periodic studies that evaluate programs but do not leave nonprofit providers with a sustained capacity for learning and innovation. Of the 1.5 million nonprofits in the United States, only 431 (0.0003%) received grants for evaluation or evaluation capacity in 2015, and only 27%¹ of nonprofits worked with external evaluators in 2016. Within the universe of evaluation grants to practitioners, the top 20 funders represent 89% (\$351,625,000) of the total grant dollars given in 2015. In contrast, the combined annual revenues of the top seven research firms was \$2.2 billion in 2015, with an estimated \$215 to \$325 million coming from private foundations.² With total foundation grants to practitioners for evaluation equal to only 15.8% of the revenues of the top seven research firms in 2015, this gap in funding flows contributes to practitioners' lack of capacity and readiness to build evidence and invest in ongoing R&D. Shifting a small percentage to better support practitioners to build promising evidence would in turn make them better prepared for third party evaluation.

In addition to working more closely with researchers and funders, nonprofit leaders will need to work closely with their teams, taking the time and energy to train staff on how to better use data and evidence in their work. At the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with recent criminal convictions through employment, employees are asked to align their work with the organization's mission and goals. The organization recently partnered with Project Evident to pilot the creation of a Strategic Evidence Plan (SEP) – a multi-year roadmap to accelerate investments and activities for continuous evidence generation and program improvement grounded in the operational realities and learning agendas of social sector organizations. CEO now makes a similar request as part of its evidence strategy, asking staff to rely more heavily on data to improve outcomes, while embracing new forms of evidence generated by machine learning, improvement science, and rapid cycle experimentation.

¹ Monitor Institute, Analysis for Project Evident Business Planning performed in 2018.

² Monitor Institute, Analysis for Project Evident Business Planning performed in 2018.



“Project Evident brings strategy to evaluation, so that organizations know what kind of evidence to build when.”

Saskia Levy Thompson,
The Carnegie Corporation of
New York

This request requires CEO to invest in its staff, training them on how the plan can enrich the quality of their work and create better long-term outcomes for CEO participants. “The SEP process positions social sector practitioners as the driver of their evidence strategy and produces a roadmap to guide investments and activities for continuous program improvement and evidence generation,” CEO’s Chief Impact Officer Brad Dudding reflected. “Our new evidence strategy provides the clearest path we’ve had yet for improving how we assist participants on their challenging journey to create a new life.”



“When R&D is part of an organization’s DNA, practitioners can leverage it to improve services, organizational strategy and public policy more broadly.”

PowerMyLearning, an education nonprofit, worked with Project Evident to develop a Strategic Evidence Plan that outlined a learning agenda mapped directly onto the theory of change behind its Family Playlists program, an initiative where students teach parents or family members recently learned skills, who then provide feedback on the lesson to the student’s teacher. PowerMyLearning articulated evaluation questions at every stage of the theory of change, from whether and how often teachers assigned playlists to their students, to how well the family-student interactions went during the assignments, to impacts of the model on student social-emotional and academic outcomes. Even as PowerMyLearning has increased capacity to engage in generating its own rigorous evidence, it understands the value of partnering with evaluation experts as its learning agenda evolves to include questions about impacts on students. Its Strategic Evidence Plan includes a strategy for continually evolving the learning agenda and for assessing when to turn to evaluation experts for evidence generation. PowerMyLearning remains in the driver’s seat, and plans to bring the best evaluation resources to bear when addressing its learning agenda.

When R&D is part of an organization’s DNA, practitioners can leverage it to improve services, organizational strategy and public policy more broadly. For example, Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) built a powerful evidence base that demonstrates the strongest outcomes for the most vulnerable mothers. During negotiations for the [South Carolina Pay for Success project](#), South Carolina wanted to use the disproportionate enrollment of mothers living in low-income zip codes as a proxy for higher risk. Although this was an imperfect proxy that was expected to present practical challenges to meeting the project’s steep enrollment goals, NFP agreed to this term because it aligned with their evidence-based strategic goals, and



“Many funders want to fund programs that are evidence-based or to fund the type of research that would lead to a third-party rigorous evaluation that “proves” program impact. However, just as important is funding the steps leading to this type of rigorous evaluation work.”

Nonprofit Leader
Project Evident Survey, 2016

presented the greatest likelihood of achieving the strongest outcomes and highest outcome payments from South Carolina. Useful insights can be drawn from the NFP model, often held up as the gold standard of evidence-based programs but less often recognized as an excellent example of practitioner-led continuous evidence building with both internal and external evaluation expertise.

With the increasing pressure on nonprofits to deliver more services, quality risk looms. In a 2018 study by Salesforce, 77% of nonprofit leaders surveyed reported increases in beneficiary need and demand for programs and services.³ The Nonprofit Finance Fund’s 2018 survey of the sector found that 86% of 3,400 nonprofit leaders surveyed expect service demand to keep rising, but only 63% expect to be able to meet that higher demand.⁴ And a 2017 study of over 800 California nonprofits indicates that 65% have experienced federal funding cuts and expect more in the near future.⁵ At the same time, an increasing percentage of practitioners recognize the importance of evaluating their programs, 85% in 2016 compared to 68% of nonprofits in 2012. Yet limited staff time, insufficient financial resources, and limited staff expertise in evaluation continue to be the top three barriers that nonprofit organizations face in evaluating their work and creating stronger programs.⁶



“Many funders don’t understand what it takes to do a strong evaluation in an efficient way that will enhance sustainability instead of burn it to the ground. [Building] capacity has to start with funding.”

Philanthropic Leader
In Conversation with Project Evident

Through tools, resources, and direct services, Project Evident and other organizations are working to help practitioners improve how they measure, evaluate, and report results, while strengthening their alignment with one another. By positioning social sector practitioners as the leaders of their evidence building agendas – in close partnership with researchers, funders, and policymakers and supported with the necessary technology, talent, and funding – we can help them rise to these challenges, supporting a new generation of evidence building that’s strategic, continuous, and inclusive.

³ Salesforce, “Nonprofit Trends Report,” 2018 (<http://www.salesforce.org/nonprofit/nonprofit-trends-report-download>).

⁴ Nonprofit Finance Fund, “State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey,” 2018 (<https://nff.org/learn/survey>).

⁵ California Association of Nonprofits, “Governments in Transition, Nonprofits in Transition,” 2017.

⁶ Innovation Network, State of Evaluation 2016, Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector, 2016 (<https://stateofevaluation.org/>).