

SECTION 4

EMBRACING A CONTINUOUS R&D-LIKE APPROACH

Evidence, for the most part, is an exercise in innovation: how to make processes work better, how to develop better products or combinations of services. At its best it is really about continuous improvement.

–BRIAN SCHOLL, “THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF
EVIDENCE BUILDING: DIRECTIONS FOR THE
NEXT GENERATION.”

The best way to improve program implementation, promote innovation and assess impact is to think of evidence building as an R&D function that informs and is informed by strategy. This section acknowledges shortcomings of traditional data and evidence practices and explores advances in the design and execution of more actionable evidence building. The approach combines analytics and data science with conventional evaluation in an intentional and continuous practice. For too long we have focused on research (the R) without the development (the D). A next generation of evidence calls for both.

In the “The Unfinished Business of Evidence Building,” Brian Scholl extolls the need for researchers to “work backwards” from practical outcomes to design worthwhile studies. Christopher Spera explores common

challenges to conducting evaluations and calls for a learning lens and increasing internal capacity of practitioners to evaluate their own programs.

In the spirit of innovation, authors Kevin Corinth and Bruce Meyer discuss overcoming the limitations of any single data source to measure poverty through the new Comprehensive Income Dataset. Kathy Stack and Gary Glickman speak to improving data analytics at the state and local government levels, and Neal Myrick of pandemic driven innovations in R&D by practitioners. David Yokum and Jake Bowers articulate the value of pre-analysis plans, and Jim Manzi what we've learned about how RCTs can best be used to assess social impact, and where they've fallen short.

Four use cases include criminal justice organization Center for Employment Opportunities, a later stage organization, which shows the importance of establishing and staffing internal R&D capacity. Children's media innovator Noggin (chapter 4.9) uses multiple strategies to quickly iterate on content and ensure it continually improves. First Place for Youth shows how a foster youth transitions organization streamlined its measurement and evaluation to zero in on one "North Star" metric: youth income and living wage. Gemma Services, which offers youth-oriented psychiatric care, describes an approach to building "evidence on demand," inspired by data science and machine learning algorithms that serve Amazon and Netflix.

Questions addressed in this section include:

1. What constitutes R&D capacity for practitioners and how can one best build it?
2. How does internal R&D capacity add to what we learn from conventional evaluation techniques (both benefits and watchouts)?
3. What do leaders need to know?