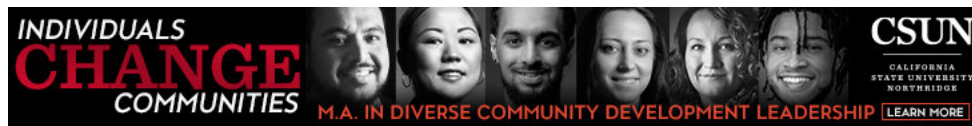


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What Type of Data Should My Nonprofit or Foundation Collect?

Alexandra Pittman
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"What type of data should we be collecting?"



I'm often asked this question as the founder of an online software tool in the social impact space. The answer is quite straightforward. Start collecting data you will use.

That might seem like an obvious answer. But it's an incredibly important step if you want to get more from the data you already collect and would like to identify key strategic data gaps that you need to

fill.

Perform a Data Audit

When we bring new clients on board with [ImpactMapper](#), we walk them through a simple data audit. Here's how to do one:

Reflect on the data you are collecting across the organization. This could be donor or grantee profiles, giving histories, surveys, project or grant reports, interviews, input from focus groups, stories of change, trip reports, annual reports, emails where impact-related information has been shared, and so on.

Make a list of the data you are actually using. In what ways and for what purposes is this data being used?

Are you collecting the right data to learn, assess progress and failures, and figure out stakeholder needs? Can you communicate your findings in alignment with your strategic contributions and goals? What data should you be collecting toward your organizational and programmatic goals?

During a data audit, many groups start to realize that they are collecting a lot of data but aren't actually using it.

Why don't people use their data optimally? Common reasons include lack of time, shifting internal priorities, insufficient staff capacity, or lack of in-house expertise to manage all the data and process it.

At the same time, groups are often sitting on treasure troves of data, especially qualitative data. Qualitative data include stories of change, project reports, grantee reports, interviews, and findings from focus groups. All of this can be mined for unique insights and outcomes.

Optimize Your Data Collection

The first step is to "right-size" your organization's data-collection activities. You need to understand how to get more out of the data you already have and how to efficiently collect data in the future.

Aim to collect data that:

Helps you learn what is working and what is not so your organization can take action and improve its programming, organizational development efforts, and/or grantmaking.

Collect basic information on grant or project details, efficiency data, staff and organizational capacities, challenges and lessons learned over time, and so on.

Make sure the data links back to organizational or programmatic strategy and implementation, closing the learning loop.

Helps you track on-the-ground needs and make adaptive decisions based on stakeholder feedback.

Ensure that any assessment of outcomes and longer-term impact is informed by experimenting with different data-collection strategies.

Choose data-collection strategies that are participatory and informed by participant voice and analysis.

Illustrates your organization's contributions to meeting the challenges its work is intended to address, and explores where and how collaborations can maximize your impact.

Track the outcomes of key partnerships and collaborations, and articulate your value added and role in these efforts.

Groups often find themselves engaged in a lot of partnerships that are not productive. Aim to reduce the number of your unproductive collaborations. If possible, leverage your most important collaborations and/or look to partner with others to maximize your impact.

Can be used to communicate your impact to diverse audiences and advocate for key gaps or needs in your area of focus.

Develop ways to use evidence and data for different communication purposes.

Create strategic links between your data, monitoring and evaluation, and communication departments with the aim of enhancing the use of data and evidence.

Learning from and using data cannot be disconnected from cultural context and organizational realities. As such, your data collection and analysis processes should always reflect your organizational and programmatic strategy. Strive to push your organization to be more transparent and accountable to your core constituents, and always, always look for ways to become more effective, efficient, and sustainable over time.

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