



# Evaluation Capacity Study Executive Summary

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## Background

Effective evaluation practice supports programs and initiatives that enhances a nonprofit's ability to achieve their mission. By implementing evaluation processes, nonprofit organizations can use data to learn and communicate with stakeholders about what is working and what needs to be improved in order to better serve clients and the community.

However, nonprofit professionals need to be skilled in evaluation in order to reap these benefits. There is growing consensus in the nonprofit community in Omaha of the importance of evaluation. A 2016 study found that Omaha area nonprofit executive directors identified evaluation as an area of need for their organizations.<sup>1</sup> Building on these findings, the purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which Omaha area nonprofit organizations have the capacity to conduct evaluation and use that evaluation data to improve program outcomes.

## The Study

This study sought to understand the individual and organizational factors that impact effective evaluation practice in Omaha area nonprofit organizations. Consistent with established literature on evaluation capacity, an existing valid and reliable survey instrument was used. The researcher sent an online survey to 603 Omaha area nonprofit organizations, with 243 individuals completing the survey (a response rate of forty percent). There were 83 questions, addressing specific areas of evaluation practice, with the majority of questions asking participants to rate each on a scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The researcher also asked participants some general organization-level questions.

The remainder of this report will highlight some of the key information gleaned about Omaha area nonprofit organizations and their attitudes towards/experience with evaluation. Implications for practice and recommended actions will conclude the report.

<sup>1</sup> Contact Dr. Tara Kolar Bryan at [tbryan@unomaha.edu](mailto:tbryan@unomaha.edu) for more information on the study.

## Do Omaha nonprofit professionals have the motivation and skills necessary to do evaluation?

Overall, survey respondents have a high level of awareness about the importance of evaluation as well as motivation to learn more about evaluation. In fact, the highest mean scores in the survey are attributed to these sets of questions. For example, 80% of survey respondents stated they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "I think that an evaluation is absolutely necessary to improve my program." Moreover, 78% of survey respondents stated they agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "I am motivated to start evaluating my program(s)."

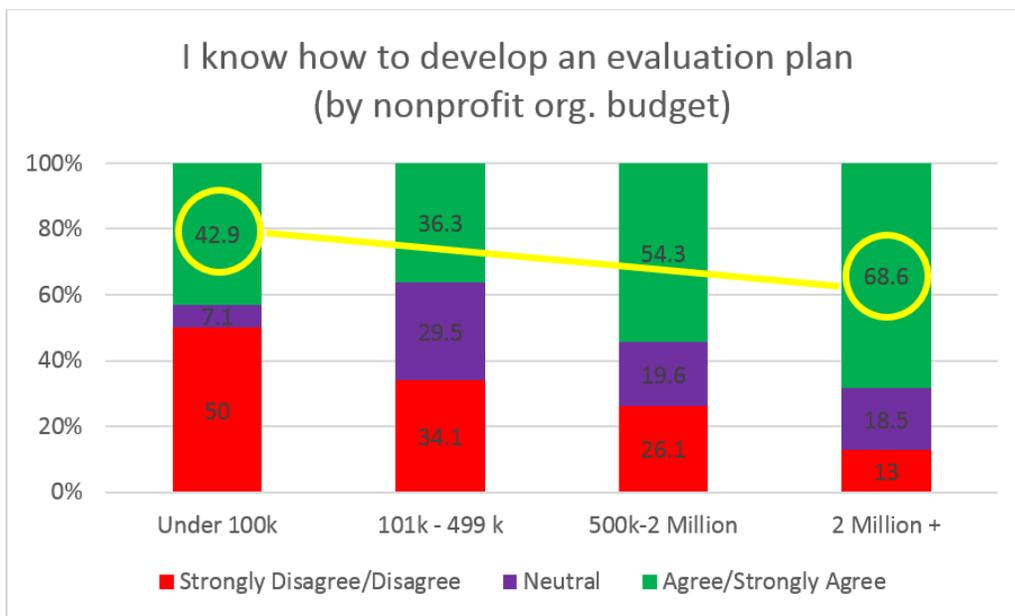
**Over 80% of respondents reported feeling that evaluation is necessary to improve their programs and 78% reported that they are motivated to start evaluation.**

Survey respondents were less confident about their skill and knowledge of evaluation. There was strong variance in the responses. For simpler evaluation knowledge and skills such as deciding from whom to collect information and stating measurable goals, over 70% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. For more complex evaluation skills, such as conducting an evaluation or developing an evaluation plan, fewer than 50% of survey respondents agreed and only 11% of those strongly agreed.

There were notable differences between organizations of different sizes. For example, 68% of individuals who work for a nonprofit with an annual budget of 2 million dollars agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I know how to develop an evaluation plan". Only 42% of survey respondents who work for a nonprofit with an annual budget of less than \$100,000 agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement.

following statement: "My organization's board uses data/information to inform their decision-making." Additionally, 80% of survey respondents stated their organizations have strategic plans. However, there was notable differences between smaller and larger nonprofits. For example, while 98% of respondents from organizations with annual budgets of over 2 million dollars have strategic plans, 59% of respondents from organizations with annual budgets of under 100,000 dollars have them.

**While an overall 80% of respondents reported having organizational strategic plans, there was a large disparity between large & small nonprofits.**



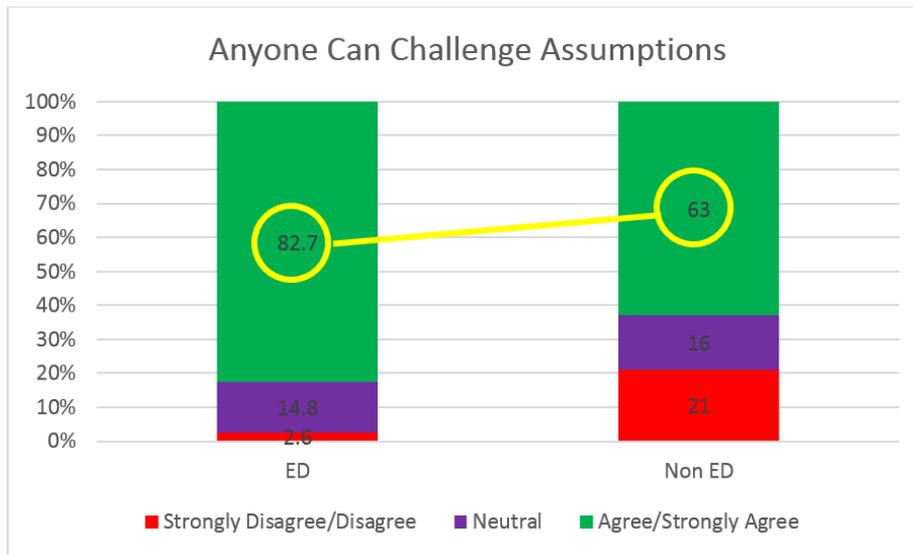
In terms of organizational climate, the results reveal between 70% to 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements such as "being open to change is viewed positively in my organization" and "in my organization, staff are encouraged to ask "why" regardless of rank. Interestingly, there were significant differences in responses from executive directors and those of staff. For example, 82% of executive directors agreed with the following statement: "Any practice or assumption can be challenged,

## Do Omaha nonprofits have an organizational climate conducive to effective evaluation practice?

For successful evaluation, having nonprofit professionals with evaluation skills and abilities is only one part of the picture. Organizations must cultivate a culture of learning in order use evaluation to improve organizational performance and to promote sustainable evaluation practices in the organization.

In general, survey respondents reported leadership valued data-driven decision making. For example, 65% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the

no matter whose it is, or how long it has been in effect." Only 63% of staff agreed with the same statement. Additionally, 88% of executive directors agreed that "staff are encouraged to ask "why" regardless of "rank," while 67% of staff agreed to the same statement.



## To what extent have Omaha nonprofit organizations mainstreamed evaluation practice into their organization? How do Omaha nonprofit organizations use evaluation data?

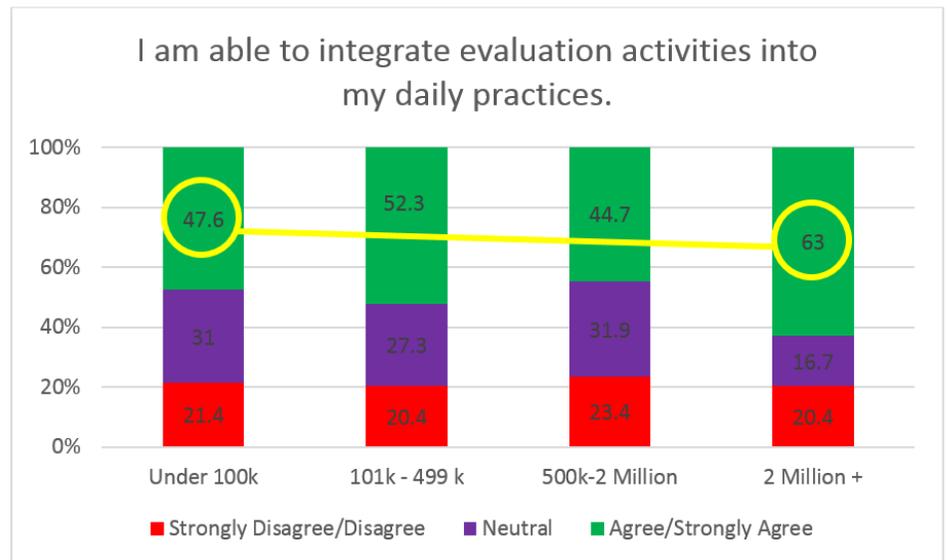
The results indicate there is more work to be done in institutionalizing evaluation practice in Omaha nonprofit organizations. 53% of survey respondents agreed that “I am able

## Do Omaha nonprofits have access to the resources necessary for effective evaluation practice?

Responses to these questions varied considerably. Between 50% to 60% respondents agreed that staff has access to adequate technology to compile information. While only 40% of survey respondents agreed that technical assistance is available to staff to address questions related to evaluation. 50% of survey respondents agreed that resources are allocated for staff training. Between 20% and 30% of survey respondents agreed that funders provide leadership and resources to conduct evaluation.

Moreover, there were significant differences between respondents in organizations of different sizes. For example, 28% of survey respondents from small, grassroots organizations agreed that resources are allocated for staff training. Sixty-one percent of survey respondents from large nonprofits agreed to the statement. Fourteen percent of survey respondents from small, grassroots organizations compared to 39% of large organizations agreed that funders provide resources to conduct evaluation.

to integrate evaluation activities into my daily practices.” Only 40% of survey respondents agreed that their programs have “adequate records of past evaluation efforts and what happened as a result.” Additionally, there were significant differences in responses based on organizational size. Smaller, grassroots organizations were less likely to agree



with both statements above. For example, 47% of survey respondents from small organizations compared to 63% of respondents from large organizations agreed that they were able to integrate evaluation activities into their daily work.

The results also reveal between 60-70% of survey respondents agreed that they used evaluation results to “improve services or programs” and “to make informed decisions.” Conversely, 35% of survey respondents agreed they used evaluation results to “eliminate unneeded services or programs.” Similarly, 40% of survey respondents agreed they used evaluation results to “train staff.”

**20-30% of respondents agreed that funders provide leadership and resources to conduct evaluation.**

**60-70% of respondents used evaluation to improve services/programs and to make informed decisions.**

Again, there were significant differences in responses based on organizational size. For example, only 33% of survey respondents from smaller organizations compared to 74% of survey respondents from larger organizations reported using data to “report to a funder.” Fifty percent of survey respondents from smaller organizations compared to 70% from larger organizations use evaluation findings to “assess quality of a program.”

### **Implications for Practice**

Evaluation practice helps nonprofits achieve their missions in a more effective and responsive way. The results from this study indicate a need to be attentive to both building individual level skills and organizational factors that facilitate the integration of evaluative activity into nonprofit organizations. These results provide important information for efforts to build evaluation capacity in nonprofit organizations in the Omaha community.

### **Building Evaluation Skills in Nonprofit Professionals is Needed**

This study finds that while nonprofit professionals understand the importance of evaluation and are motivated to evaluate their programs, they lack the evaluation competencies to fully incorporate evaluative practice in their organizations. In particular, educational and training programs should encompass more complex evaluation skills development (i.e. building an evaluation plan, conducting an evaluation) in addition to the more basic evaluation skills development (i.e. collecting data and identifying measurable goals).

### **Resources for Evaluation in Nonprofit Organizations is Lacking**

The findings of this study indicates that while a majority of nonprofit organizations have access to technology, they lack the staff time and technical assistance necessary to conduct meaningful evaluation. It is important to note, if the skills of staff members are developed (as discussed above) the need for technical assistance may be less. However, in its absence, nonprofits need access to evaluation support. In addition, a majority of survey respondents reported funders

did not provide resources for evaluation. If evaluation is a priority, providing financial support for evaluation activities is an important strategy to pursue.

### **Nonprofit Organizations of Different Sizes Need Different Evaluation Capacity Interventions**

Smaller nonprofit organizations need different evaluation capacity building programs and activities than larger, more established nonprofit organizations. Consistent with the organizational development literature, smaller nonprofits require more basic knowledge and skills about evaluation whereas larger nonprofit organizations may be ready for more complex evaluation skills. Those who design programs for evaluation capacity building should understand these differences, and design curriculum accordingly.

### **Leadership Matters for Mainstreaming Evaluation Practice in Nonprofit Organizations**

The results of this study reveal staff have a less favorable perception of their organization’s environment for learning than executive directors. This is important because staff can receive training and education in evaluation practice, but if they do not feel that it is supported and advocated for by an organization’s leadership, it is unlikely to be sustained over the long term. Educational activities and programs that emphasize leadership skills associated with cultivating a learning culture will assist the development and integration of evaluative practice in nonprofit organizations.