

Nonprofit Capacity Building Needs Assessment and Asset Map MOST Community Conversation Summary

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Introduction: Nonprofit Capacity Building Needs Assessment and Asset Map

The ability of nonprofits to have a positive and lasting impact depends largely on their organizational capacity, the skills and training of staff, and the availability of resources needed to support programs. Extension-Dane County and Madison Community Foundation are hosting a series of conversations with leaders of non-profit organizations in four sectors (youth out-of-school-time, environment, arts, and community development). Our goal is to understand the identified needs for training and capacity building, as well as the resources currently available to support the non-profit sector in Dane County. The results of these conversations will inform non-profit serving organizations and suggest ways that funders, educational support organizations, and consultants can help to address gaps that are identified.

Our first community conversation, held May 30, 2019, included 24 people at four conversation tables (plus facilitators and notetakers). This report is an analysis of those conversations. Additionally, we included content from three follow-up phone conversations, which were held after the community conversations in order to assure that suggestions from all voices were heard and recorded adequately. While this report does not include findings from the original survey and the evaluation survey, that data will be considered as part of the full report (to be developed at the conclusion of the project).

Essential Skills and Competencies for Nonprofit Leaders

What are the necessary skills for non-profit leaders in the OST sector? We asked participants to share skills that they were surprised to learn were essential to their job. In response, participants mentioned a wide range of both skills and competencies. For the purposes of this study, we think of skills as specific learned activities that vary in levels of complexity. We consider competencies to be a deeper, broader level of engagement, encompassing knowledge, skills, and the ability to successfully apply these skills and knowledge in a specific context.

Skills

Participants mentioned specific learned activities that non-profit leaders must have proficiency in so as to keep the organization fiscally sound and operating in service to its mission.

- *Organizational Management*: Leaders maintain/improve organizational systems, which requires an understanding of and proficiency with personnel, financial, legal, regulatory, and technical systems.
- *Fund development*: Every non-profit organization needs funds to pay for staff, program, administrative, and facilities costs. Even in an organization with a development director, Executive Directors and Board members play a role in fund development and need to understand and play a role in fund-raising strategies.
- *Data collection and evaluation*: Increasingly, nonprofit organizations are charged with reporting impact (rather than reporting outputs/numbers of participants). Non-profit leaders must understand how to measure impact and evaluate programs. Additionally, leaders must learn how to measure and communicate 'return on investment.'
- *Financial management (budgeting, reporting, planning)*: Executive Directors hold responsibility – together with the Board of Directors – for the fiscal health of an organization. The skills of developing budgets, reporting on finance, and planning revenue and expense are essential in communicating with the board and in keeping track of the financial health of an organization.
- *Strategic and Program Planning*: Setting a strategic direction for the organization and aligning programs to this direction is critical to keeping a non profit organization on track.]
- *Technical (communications, website development, computer systems)*: While the task of maintaining computer, communications, and other technical systems may fall on other staff than the Executive, the ED needs to keep track of all systems, and be able to able to explain how these systems are being used to advance the mission of the organization.

Competencies

From participant comments, it was clear that learning a particular skill was not enough - instead, non-profit leaders have to apply skills to real situations, including managing staff, dealing with funders, and designing and evaluating programs in the context of limited resources, high demand, and cultural appropriateness. For many participants, competencies have not been formally taught. Rather, non-profit leaders learn on the job, through observation, trial and error, analysis, and by taking personal initiative to embody these competencies. The following competencies (and explanations) are derived from participant comments:

- *Staff support and advancement:* Non-profit organizations are most successful when staff are able to execute their roles effectively. Non-profit leaders serve as coaches and counselors to program staff, providing them with guidance, resources, and opportunities for growth and advancement. Leaders develop skills of communications, team building, and staff guidance - monitoring relationships and personal issues so as to avoid staff burn-out. Non-profit leaders must balance getting the work done with maintaining staff well-being.
- *Leadership:* Non-profit leaders build a positive work environment with staff, and also position the organization within the sector and in the community. Being a leader means serving as a role model for staff, program participants, community members, and others working in the field. Leaders put the interest of the organization and its employees and clients above self-serving motivations.
- *Cultural competency:* Participants were well aware that both staff and stakeholders come from a range of backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and experiences, and that in order to connect and communicate, all staff need skills in understanding race, privilege, and position.
- *People skills/communication:* Non-profit leaders deal with people at all levels, from program participants to staff to high-end donors. Building relationships and connections requires a high level of skill at listening, validating, and problem solving. Non-profit managers learn self-care along with empathy for staff and stakeholders. These relational skills are also necessary to address staff conflict and to build broad networks of partnerships and collaboration.
- *Relationship building:* Non profit leaders model the culture of the organization; how the manager interacts with staff will likely determine the nature of staff interactions. Additionally, the Executive Director is typically charged with relationship building with Board members, supporters, and partnering/collaborating organizations. The strength of these human relationships is a measure of the strength of the organization.
- *Time management:* Multi-tasking is standard for any non-profit leader; being able to manage all the tasks within time parameters is a skill that all learn on the job.
- *Adaptability/flexibility/ crisis management:* One commonality noted by non profit managers was that they had to be ready to adjust to situations as they arise, changing roles as is demanded by the situation, be that of maintenance worker, computer technician, program director, staff supervisor, or organization ambassador.
- *Entrepreneurship/risk taking:* Non-profit leaders must be willing to take risks by trying new enterprises, approaches, or understanding of an issue. Nonprofit organizations are

entrepreneurial social enterprise businesses; leaders must be willing to experiment with new approaches and methods that are both youth-centered and fiscally responsible.

Training Needs to Build Essential Skills and Competencies

Skills and competencies can be learned through training programs, but we wanted to find out how non-profit leaders might learn best, given the limited resources and time for training. While training programs are appreciated, participants recognized that formal training programs, especially one-off training sessions, fall short if not combined with opportunities to reflect on what was learned, practice what was learned, and then get feedback and support. Training combined with mentoring, coaching, networking, or other follow-up activity would have greater impact. While technical skills (for example, understanding financial statements, grant writing, and managing a Board of Directors) can be learned through formal training, turning these skills into competencies (e.g., learning how to turn Board members into ambassadors and advocates for the organization) is best accomplished through peer learning opportunities.

We also heard repeated that a longer term program (6-12 months) with consistent participation would be preferable, so that peers would develop a rapport with one another over the course, and would provide peer support to one another beyond the training. Topics that were mentioned as valuable mirrored (and expanded on) the skills discussed above, in particular: staff support & management, working in partnerships/collaborations, program planning & impact evaluation, strategic planning/work planning, fund-raising, leadership skills (leadership transition), working with boards, communications, conflict management, budgeting, and cultural competency/diversity.

Two suggestions arose regarding the level of leadership training needed for OST providers. First, a training program specific for new Executive Directors would be of value. Someone coming into a leadership position from either a program position or outside of the OST field would need foundational training that would not be needed by Executive Directors who have been in that position for a while. As such, training should be specific to either new leadership or continuing leaders. For continuing leaders, the training model should emphasize networking, peer learning, and sharing of experiences. The second suggestion specific to OST would be to develop training programs to advance program staff to positions of leadership. In the OST field, there has been intentionality about hiring program staff from the communities being served. Young adults coming into the field may have limited academic credentials, but have lived experience and understanding of the situations that young people involved in OST programming may be experiencing. These young adults would be candidates for supervisory or management positions if they were provided with suitable training to learn leadership and organizational management skills.

Other Crucial Capacity Needs: Mentoring, Collaboration, and Evaluation

Mentoring

We heard that an important way for organizational leaders to build their capacity is through mentorship and coaching. According to those gathered, a strong mentorship or coaching relationship tends to have several key features. It involves ongoing dialogue and engagement vs. a single conversation. It is also based on the value of mutual learning and benefit. For instance, a veteran leader of an established organization might mentor a newer leader for a nascent organization in the details of financial management, fundraising, and building a board, but that newer leader might mentor the veteran leader about grassroots neighborhood dynamics.

Honest and open dialogue about race and racism may be an important part of the mentoring relationship as well. Leaders of color may find it essential to be in a mentoring relationship with other leaders of color. On the other hand, white leaders (often more established and in positions of privilege relative to access to resources and power) might be mentored by leaders of color, who might in turn gain more of the respect and status in the community that they deserve. (See further discussion below under “Structural Issues.”) Moreover, a mentor cannot be imposed on a mentee. Mentee’s need to be able to choose their own mentors.

Collaboration and Network Building

There was broad agreement that collaboration and network building are crucial to Out-of-School-Time work but many participants discussed several challenges to effective collaboration. For newer program staff and leaders, especially those who have just arrived in Madison, having access to a network of experienced people is very helpful, but these networks aren’t always readily available or it’s not always clear how to get plugged into existing networks. Madison Out-of-School-Time is engaged in important network-building work but this may need to be augmented. For instance, MOST might need additional resources to become more visible to new people in the field, or to strengthen smaller networks for those working in, for instance, a certain neighborhood or a certain sub-sector such as sports and outdoor recreation or academic tutoring. For some participants, they would also find value in more opportunities to connect with non-profit leaders outside of the Out-of-School-Time field, or with leaders in the for-profit sector.

Several people mentioned the need for collaboration among organizations to make sure individual kids get connected to the right program for them. Again, MOST provides a platform for making these connections but there may be ways these efforts can be strengthened and expanded.

Building collaborative relationships between organizations can also facilitate information and resource sharing about typical challenges but also lots of unexpected issues that arise. For instance, it’s very helpful for executive directors to have a group of experienced colleagues to ask about things such as: Can you recommend a good consultant for program assessment? Who should I call to fix my building’s HVAC system? How can I improve my organizational budgeting process? For those already engaged in these collaborative relationships, there’s also a desire to spend more time and energy addressing systemic issues but they have limited capacity to do so.

One persistent and pervasive challenge to collaboration across organizations is limited time and the urgency of attending to one's day to day programs. Some said that having a third party, such as a funder, provide space and funding for gatherings or for collaborative projects would be helpful. That said, others warned against the unhelpful attempts by third parties such as funders or government agencies to force collaboration or expect it without providing adequate funding or support. (See further discussion below under "Lessons for Funders.")

Evaluation

We heard that there is a strong need for training and resources to improve the culture and practice of evaluation and impact assessment. There needs to be research and discussion across the sector, together with funders to identify and assess the most meaningful outcomes.

Many organizations desire support for collecting, analyzing, and sharing data in a more sophisticated way. There is a need to discern how to use both quantitative and qualitative assessment in rigorous, efficient, fair and equitable ways. Several participants spoke to the need for assistance from evaluation experts and consultants, for instance from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison. There also needs to be attention to equity related to resources for evaluation; all organizations need some form of support to conduct evaluations well, and funding and assistance should be provided in a fair and equitable way.

It is also important to include the youth in the evaluation process. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other evaluation methods that engage youth need to be appropriate to their experience and perspective. The use of images or photographs might work better than text for some youth, especially younger kids. Ideally, youth can also be engaged as field researchers to assist with assessing programs.

Participants also expressed a desire to collect data and conduct evaluations across the sector and collaborate on shared metrics and outcomes as appropriate. One of the challenges to cross-sector evaluation, however, is that the most meaningful outcomes may vary widely based on context of population engaged. For instance, for some programs that are working with relatively engaged students, quantitative metrics related to academic improvement may be best for assessing program success. For other programs working with youth struggling with major trauma, non-academic assessments of success may be more meaningful.

Dynamics Specific to Out-of-School-Time Work: Special Skills, Serving Youth

Special Skills

In addition to the information participants gave about general organizational management, they also touched on skills and issues specific to the Out of School Time sector of non-profit organizations. The skills participants mentioned include curriculum development, soft skills, trauma-informed care, cultural competency, social justice sensitivity, active shooter training and more.

Some of the soft skills participants mentioned that were specific to OST centered around effectively interacting with and mentoring young people. This includes being able to maximize

the few times service workers meet with students, learning to do the emotional labor involved with serving underrepresented populations, and having the flexibility, quick-thinking, and resourcefulness required of the job. Trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and social justice sensitivity training are all part of this work as well, all especially important for frontline staff who work closely with the students. Participants talked about the importance of having the training to properly understand and address the specific needs of different types of young people, for example students with special needs. They talked about offering holistic support for students, emotionally and academically, as well as support for their parents and living situations. This holistic approach is needed because of social inequities that create an opportunity gap for youth.

Serving Youth

To implement a holistic approach to working with youth, participants say it might be best to have a greater impact on a small amount of students rather than a smaller impact on a larger group of students. This also means bringing more support to the smaller grassroots and/or organizations led by people of color which are closer to the communities. These are the organizations that have the most impact though in smaller areas, and, according to some participants, the paternalism and bigotry inherent in the status quo of the sector is hindering them from operating at capacity. Participants also talked about wanting to improve relationships between schools and the OST organizations. Both parties need to be on the same page when it comes to impact evaluation, funding, and understanding underlying social issues.

Some major themes that have already been mentioned were reiterated, such as the importance of networking and collaborating with other organizations. However, participants' responses showed that these were especially important for the OST sector since, as one participant explained, networking and collaborating are ways in which different organizations can work together to fill each other's gaps in reaching and serving the needs of different students around Dane County. This connects to the question participants raised about where OST sector organizations should focus their efforts when trying to support students, whether through academic or non-academic avenues, namely sports. According to participants, the desire is always to meet students where they are in order to support their needs.

Another issue hindering the function of these organization is low wages. For the amount of work and skill required of the job, workers are paid very little for their time. This leads to high burnout and high turnover rates. One participant noted that a whole benefits package should be made available for full time workers.

The amount of skill required of this job makes hiring new workers difficult. One participant advised setting up a professional development pipeline where employees are recruited among older students or members of the community with an interest in service work and putting them through an established training program that then funnels them into positions in the OST

organizations. Participants emphasize trainings that bring together the whole sector and which are shared across orgs, such as a collaborative program apparently being organized by Goodman, Kennedy, and Lussier.

The Role of Structural Inequities

With all these issues and training needs, one of the biggest obstacles many organizations face come from outside the sector all together. These are the macro-level, structural issues: the very underlying institutional systems of oppression which the organizations are trying to fight in the first place. Participants talked about hierarchies of power that perpetuate already existing systems of oppression - including racism, sexism, and classism - and make it difficult for grassroots and other organizations to do the work. Those organizations led by people of color, in particular, observed that long-standing and on-going paternalism and bigotry are entrenched in the power structure of the city. Leaders of color expressed that they perceive that they are held to more stringent expectations around evaluation, financial reporting, and communications. Additionally, they are sidelined by many funders despite efforts to conform to grant submission guidelines. For example, some participants talked about what it is like being a person of color in charge of a non-profit organization, the necessity to often dial back the salience of their race or to perform a more acceptable identity. Participants also said that those in positions of power set themselves up as paternalistic “experts,” marginalizing the wisdom, experience, and knowledge of smaller grassroots organizations that actually interact with the students they seek to help. Participants also call for more cohesion and collaboration on city, county, and state level as the lack thereof makes it difficult for organizations to attempt to adhere to their standards.

Lessons for Funders and Other Non-Profit Serving Organizations

An impediment to moving the OST sector forward is the limited funding available for programming and for paying staff living wages. Organizations find themselves competing for funding from a limited pool of local funders. While OST providers are not competing amongst themselves for program participants (indeed, a thread of the conversation was that diversity in programming benefits the youth being served, and that OST organizations should and have collaborated to help families identify the right fit in programming), organizations do compete for funding. Umbrella organizations (MOST) are looking into policy options - such as a designated state/federal funding stream or targeted tax) to improve funding for the sector across all organizations. Improved funding would go a long way to addressing the challenge of keeping trained staff in the field.

Funders were asked to consider altering their approach to evaluating outcomes of OST programming. While universal measures such as improvements in academic performance are desirable, these measures may not be appropriate across all programs and for all populations being served. Conversation participants emphasized that for many youth, having an adult mentor, showing up for program activities, and reduced truancy at school represent success -

these indicators may be more appropriate for youth who have been alienated from the school environment yet need a boost to be ready for adult life in community and careers.

Several participants expressed a desire for a paradigm shift in the way funders engage with organizations and distribute grants. While details on what a paradigm shift entails were not discussed in the limited time available, calls for increased transparency in funding decisions, involvement of youth in decision-making, and shifts in evaluative protocols were mentioned.

We also heard that there is a role for funders in convening non-profit leaders for discussions, trainings, and networking with peers. Leaders expressed appreciation for the opportunity to talk with and learn from one another, but they are overwhelmed in their day to day life with running the organization, and need spaces away from their workplaces to recharge, renew, and learn.

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