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## The Nonprofit Nerd (October 2016)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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# THE NONPROFIT NERD

Research you can use.

## This month's theme is **Creating a Culture of Evaluation.**

NPI's Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation kicks off this month! If you missed the chance to join us in this year's cohort, we hope you'll follow along as we share what we're learning about. This month we're exploring what it means to build a "culture of evaluation" in our organizations. Let the resources and insights we share in The Nonprofit Nerd inspire you to get your nerd on and find innovative ways to make research and data work for you and your nonprofit!



### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

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NPI chose to highlight resources for creating a culture of evaluation in nonprofits after reading the [2016 Northwest Nonprofit Capacity Report](#). The report, which draws on survey data from nonprofits in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, suggests that nonprofits struggle to not only do evaluation, but also to use evaluation findings meaningfully in organizational decision-making.

What exactly are nonprofits struggling with, when it comes to doing and using evaluation in their organizations? A couple of recent studies and reports can give us some insight. First, Innovation Network's [State of Evaluation: Evaluation Practice and Capacity in the Nonprofit Sector](#) provides some key insights, including the fact that more than 70% of nonprofits surveyed spend less than 5% of their budgets on evaluation activities. Reports from [Grantmakers for Effective Organizations](#) and the [Bruner Foundation](#) also discuss nonprofit evaluation capacity issues in-depth.

If you're curious about your nonprofit's culture of evaluation, [Western Michigan University's Evaluation Center](#) and [Innovation Network](#) provide some handy checklists to begin assessing your organization and

its capacity to engage effectively in evaluation work.



## NERDS AT WORK

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In this issue, we are proud to feature an interview with “Nerd at Work,” Swati Adarkar, Executive Director of [Children’s Institute](#), an Oregon nonprofit whose mission is to move research to action by promoting cost-effective public and private investments in children.

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### How does research, data, and evaluation shape your approach to your work?

Children’s Institute was founded on the notion that an abundance of research about improving the lives of vulnerable children was buried in numerous reports sitting on dusty shelves. An urgent need existed to translate research, data, and evaluation into action and to align the findings with public and private resource allocation. Our policy and practice focus on investment and development from prenatal to third grade has been shaped by solid research across multiple disciplines including health, education, neuroscience, and economics. As part of our [Early Works initiative](#), we work closely with two elementary schools and other partners to align and integrate early education, health, and K-12 guided by research on school success. Dr. Beth Green, a research professor at the Portland State University School of Social Work’s [Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services](#), is working with us on the different Early Works evaluation components. These include a community needs assessment, a community health assessment, a longitudinal child and family outcomes study, and a systems evaluation. In addition to this external evaluation team, we have Children’s Institute staff members with significant evaluation experience who continuously review data for quality improvement purposes at the Early Works sites and who guide our policy, advocacy, and implementation work.

Our work has expanded beyond policy and advocacy to be more engaged in implementation and deep partnerships on the ground. We have learned the importance of balancing community input and lived experience with more traditional, academic research. We have also learned to take a broader view of “evidence” in working alongside communities.

### What role does data play in your organization's decision-making and strategic direction?

The use of data is essential in our policy and practice work. Understanding the connection between Oregon’s third grade reading scores, entrenched opportunity gaps for children of color and low-income kids, and high school graduation has shaped our strategic direction. We also have firm evidence that achievement gaps for low income kids are established by kindergarten, and that children who start behind often stay behind in the K-12 system. This reality directs our focus on early strategies, supports, and investments, from prenatal through third grade, that strengthen the early learning continuum, engage parents and communities, and connect the health and education sectors.

## What kind(s) or sources of research and data do you find most valuable?

The most valuable sources of research and data depend on the question being asked and the information gap that the data needs to fill. In the past we relied heavily on academic research and large scale studies in the field. We still rely on those, but we also depend on community-based data all the way up to population-based data. We triangulate data sources regularly to develop the fullest picture of the needs from the community level on up to the state level. Having good sources of data at multiple levels is critical to guide our work.

## What advice do you have for fellow nonprofit professionals to encourage them in using research, data, and evaluation?

We all bring different skill sets to the table when working to assess and analyze problems. It's valuable to have someone on your team who has the skill set to analyze and interpret data, research findings, and evaluation results. It's also valuable to have people with varied perspectives and experiences to assess and interpret findings that can influence actionable next steps. Data alone is not sufficient, but the shared ability to make sense of it and to utilize this understanding for further discussion, collaboration, and action is crucial for nonprofits working to impact and improve the communities they serve.

*Know someone you'd like to see featured in the Nonprofit Nerd? Tell us who and why!*



### INSTITUTE NEWS

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10/27 - Come chat with our graduate program representatives at the [CUPA graduate programs information session](#).

11/1 - Deadline to [apply for spring admission](#) for the MPA and for the Graduate Certificate in Nonprofit and Public Management at PSU.

11/9 - Attend our [Mid-Career Professional Graduate Fair](#) for answers to all your questions about coursework, scheduling and work/life balance as a mid-career student.



### FELLOW NERDS

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If you're interested in learning more about building a culture of evaluation, NPI recommends you get to know the great work of these fellow nerds, some of whom are based right here in Portland!

[Oregon Program Evaluators Network \(OPEN\)](#)

[Better Evaluation](#)

[Innovation Network](#)

[WK Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook](#)

[The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University](#)

[University of Wisconsin-Extension's Program Development and Evaluation Learning Store](#)

If that's not nerdy enough for you, check out [our local and national friends](#) and the great research, data, and best practice resources they have to offer.



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