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The Nonprofit Nerd (September 2019)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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The Nonprofit
Institute
PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

Monthly Newsletter
September 2019

THE NONPROFIT NERD

Research you can use.

This month's topic is program evaluation education

We are taking this month to introduce you to an educator, evaluator, researcher, and academic who is also The Nonprofit Institute's Interim Director, Dr. Masami Nishishiba.

The Nonprofit Institute has been preparing for another year of the popular [Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation](#), offered in partnership with WVDO. Dr. Nishishiba has been integral in transitioning the organization into another year. We are fortunate to have her expertise in research and evaluation design available to our institute and to students joining us in 2019-2020 learning opportunities.

We're also excited to share news about a new learning opportunity, The Nonprofit Institute's [Data Learning Center](#) workshop series. We hope you will join us to learn together as a community as we pilot this new program. The pilot workshops are provided free of charge.

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!



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NONPROFIT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Evaluation Certificate Applications Due & FREE Data Learning Workshops

September 15 is the final day NPI is accepting applications for the popular [Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation](#), offered in partnership with [WVDO](#). Check the [program web page](#) for application instructions and tips for discussing the program with your organization. Email us at npi@pdx.edu if you need assistance or further details.

The Nonprofit Institute is piloting a new workshop series called [Data Learning Center](#). We need you to attend FREE pilot workshops to help us fine-tune our new brief data and evaluation education series. [Data Learning Center](#) has been developed in response to conversations The Nonprofit Institute had with nonprofits representatives, that culminated in the creation of half- and full-day workshops focused on helping nonprofits maximize the use and understanding of data.

Our first workshop "[Data 101: Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups](#)" is scheduled from 1 to 4 PM on Monday, September 23 at the PSU Urban Center building. [Register](#) for this free workshop and help us develop this program. We ask only for your participation in a brief evaluation after the class, but otherwise you receive this training at no-cost to your organization.



NERDS AT WORK



The Nonprofit Institute's Interim Director, Dr. Masami Nishishiba, spoke with us about her work with NPI, her background, and reflections on evaluation practice. Dr. Nishishiba also serves as the Associate Director of the [Center for Public Service](#), and a Department Chair and Professor of Public Administration in the [Mark O. Hatfield School of Government](#) at Portland State University. We are honored to work alongside Dr. Nishishiba, and to be able to work more closely on the Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation, as an instructor and program manager.

Tell us about your role with The Nonprofit Institute (NPI). Why did you first get involved and what has motivated you to continue working with NPI?

My engagement with NPI goes all the way back to when it was still the Institute for Nonprofit Management (INPM). I was a doctoral student and although I was not directly engaged with INPM projects, I was aware of what INPM had been doing. Later, when INPM became NPI, and brought under the umbrella of the Center for Public Service (CPS), I became more involved serving as the Associate Director for the CPS and oversaw the transition of INPM to NPI. I had been closely following Dr. Billie Sandberg's educational philosophy when she started the Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation. Early on in development, Dr. Sandberg asked me to teach one session, which I was glad to do. The second year I taught two sessions. That was my direct engagement with the program evaluation certificate. Additionally, since NPI took on some applied

evaluation projects, I worked with Billie on a couple evaluation projects as well.

Dr. Sandberg stepped down from the Director of NPI for sabbatical, and in the transition, CPS has encountered challenges identifying a new NPI director. During this transition period, we thought the ideal candidate for NPI Director was someone who not only understands the NPI and its philosophy but also someone who could support and expand the evaluation certificate as one of the NPI's major programs. Since CPS has been undergoing our own transition with our long-term director Phil Keisling's retirement, I said "OK, I will step up and do it." With my familiarity and my background in evaluation, it sounded like a good interim solution. As an Interim Director, my primary goal is to find the right NPI director. I will also be overseeing the management of the evaluation certificate program, while serving as an instructor for several sessions.

When you've taught for the Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation, you have often focused on evaluation design. What expertise do you bring to this topic? And, in your work as an evaluator, what's the one thing you have found to be the most valuable lesson that guides you in practice?

One of my focus areas in my doctoral education was research design and data analysis. I have taught analytic methods courses and wrote a textbook. I have applied my background in research design and data analyses and have conducted a number of evaluation projects. As a matter of fact, my dissertation was based on an evaluation of a diversity initiative for an agency. I think I bring in some of my academic training as well as some of my practical experience working with different types of organizations doing evaluation to the certificate program.

I wrote the book *[Research Methods and Statistics for Public and Nonprofit Administrators](#)* so that practitioners can understand how different components should fit together when they are engaged in projects that involve data collection and analyses. Most often these are evaluation or needs assessment projects. The book, *Research Methods and Statistics*, has three different story lines with each practitioner in the stories trying to address practical issues through applied research. The story lines take the reader through the projects step-by-step—from identification of the issue to identification of the approach (research design) to data collection and analysis. The intent is to provide the learner a concrete way to understand how different pieces of the analytic process fit when conducting an applied research project, such as program evaluation. I think having the story lines help people internalize some complex information.

The most valuable lesson I learned in my practice is the importance of having a good understanding of the needs of the organization and making sure that those needs are met with the right amount of academic rigor. This sometimes means that the approach academic research would suggest may not be practical or feasible, because you really need to put priority in addressing the needs of the organization. But, you also don't want to do an evaluation project that would not meet the minimum academic rigor. Making sure you have a good balance is something that I always pay attention to most.

The Nonprofit Institute will begin offering workshops on data in September as part of the Data Lab project, covering topics from focus groups to needs assessment. How will these workshops support those who want to grow their evaluation skills? Who are the workshops designed for?

Through the Data Lab project, NPI developed the [Data Learning Center](#) workshops through conversations with nonprofit organizations about what they need to improve the use of data in their day-to-day work. The workshops are designed for those who want focused-training on certain topics and aren't yet able to commit to a year-long cohort training. The Data Learning Center workshops will bring in expertise from practitioners in academia and the community.

Our major program, the [Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation](#), offered in partnership with [WVDO](#), takes cohort members through the step-by-step process of completing their own evaluation project. In Data Learning Center, we have tried to provide brief skills training. So, let's say someone decided to do a survey as part of an evaluation but don't yet have in-depth understanding and skills to complete an effective survey. In

that case, a time-compressed [Data Learning Center](#) workshop may allow people to further dip into a specific area or technique that they can use. That's the general design of Data Learning Center.

Since you have experience researching with diverse populations, including international work, what role does culture play in evaluation? Are there commonly shared principles helpful for evaluating with any population?

I think culture plays a very important role in evaluation. First, the evaluator's cultural background determines the kind of assumptions that the evaluators make about how the research or how the evaluation should be done, as well as how the people you are working with think about things. There are a lot of assumptions that evaluators make, which is influenced by the evaluator's own cultural background. It is important for evaluators to have a reflective moment to think "what are my assumptions?" Usually, it's the "taken for granted assumptions," wherein we don't realize we're making an assumption, that need to be uncovered. We take so much for granted but sometimes it's these assumptions that don't transfer to the culture you are collecting data from or the organization you are working with. These assumptions make it so you can't fully pay attention and it can create misunderstandings with the potential of collecting data that is not necessarily appropriate. It's very important that you are mindful of different cultural assumptions and the practices of the people or population you are working with, whether you are working together to collect the data, or you are collecting the data directly.

Additionally, I think it is important to pay attention to the power dynamics that culture or society defines for you and others when you are doing a program evaluation. It is part of cultural awareness that I think you should pay attention to power dynamics in a given situation. Who has the louder voice in that population? Who is at the table? Who is not at the table? Who has more access to information? Who doesn't have access to information? Those are the kinds of cultural relations that an evaluator always has to be mindful about. To summarize, evaluators are often collecting information from people who have access to information and a sense of power. You might not notice that there are other types of information that are important.

What resources have you found helpful and want to pass along to the Nonprofit Nerd community?

Of course, I have to say PSU is a great resource!

As a professor, I personally draw information mostly from the academic outlets, such as academic journals. But I know that academic sources may not necessarily seem like accessible resources for the entire *Nonprofit Nerd* community. At the same time, I frequently encounter some information that is shared in the popular trade journal that is way too thin and it's not great when people jump on a bandwagon just because a trade journal popularized a concept.

I suggest finding an academic journal that meets your unique needs and to follow it on a regular basis. Sometimes it is helpful to look at books with academic leanings and at the same time have a critical eye on the trade journals or popularized information to develop or enhance critical thinking skills. And perhaps some academic resources will help you do that.

Another thing, the foundation of program evaluation requires a basic understanding of research design, data analysis, and data collection. Program evaluation is not something you can just learn through performing or participating in evaluation without even thinking about research design and data analysis. Evaluation has to be connected to this foundation. Don't be afraid to jump into research analysis and research topics, since reviewing this information helps people develop improved design and program evaluation skills.

Know someone you'd like to see featured in the Nonprofit Nerd? [Tell us who and why!](#)



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Finding time to review resources or train to build capacity in data foundations is difficult and sometimes costly, which is why we've located several no-cost resources from research and evaluation centers, including academic resources.

Some resources we recommend to help evaluators locate sources that can be utilized when researching best practices include:

- ["Evaluating Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change Interventions: Lessons Learned From CDC's Prevention Research Centers"](#) includes several illustrations and describes the CDC evaluation model. If the CDC evaluation framework is helpful to you, ["CDC's Program Evaluation Journey: 1999 to Present"](#) offers more insight into CDC practices.
- [UCSF Family Health Outcomes Project](#) offers a page of evaluation resources specific to health program evaluation.
- Mixed methods evaluation in a healthcare environment are focused on in ["Development and application of the RE-AIM QuEST mixed methods framework for program evaluation"](#)
- [National Endowment for the Arts](#) compiled a list of evaluation resources, especially for those evaluating arts programs
- [Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement](#) has a web page with compiled resources on program evaluation, including many of their own published material
- The [Center for Evaluation Innovation](#) offers webinars, case studies, articles and more
- The [AEA has a webpage](#) listing academic centers focusing on evaluation
- University of Michigan offers [a library guide on program evaluation](#)

We hope that these resources guide new and seasoned evaluators to learn more about the fundamentals and ongoing improvements in evaluation practice.

Email us at npi@pdx.edu if there is a resource you would like shared with the Nonprofit Nerd community.



INSTITUTE NEWS

- [Learn more about PSU's Master's degree in Nonprofit Leadership](#)
- [Interested in deepening your expertise in program evaluation? Apply today to NPI and WVDO's Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation](#)
- [WVDO, The Nonprofit Institute's partner, offers the Certificate in Grant Writing.](#)