A Matter of Process and Product: Lessons from a Collaborative Research Project

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Abstract

Community-based research has tremendous potential to successfully address the needs and priorities of a variety of groups and institutions, including higher education faculty, agency staff, local officials, and the philanthropic community. This article summarizes findings and lessons from a national two-year project that partnered university faculty and nonprofit/local government program staff in a collaborative research project. Based on longitudinal survey and interview data of faculty and program staff from 19 partnerships, we find that college and university faculty, higher education institutions, local governments and nonprofit organizations, and funders reap multiple benefits from engaging in community-based research. We also suggest steps each of these constituencies can take in order to forge successful partnerships that enhance knowledge and build stronger communities.

Few would dispute that the past decade has been trying for the nonprofit sector. The list of challenges includes increased public scrutiny, diminishing levels of financial support, operating deficits, negative media coverage, heated controversy about issues such as foundation pay-out requirements and advocacy, rapidly changing technology, and increased competition from for-profit providers (Light, 2004; Salamon, 2003). Particularly prominent among the various challenges is the pressure for nonprofit accountability. Federal and state legislatures as well as the philanthropic community are requiring program staff to evaluate their work and demonstrate outcomes in more sophisticated, quantifiable, and credible ways. Although such requirements serve a useful purpose, the burgeoning demands for evaluation often outpace the capacity and knowledge of the nonprofit sector.

Program evaluation is often greeted with resistance, reluctance, and fear. Among the obstacles:

- Evaluation often evokes anxiety among program staff (i.e. they may question the motives and choices of evaluators and fear that imperfect or incomplete outcome data will lead to cuts in funding or services provided).
- Regular program staff members often lack the skills and knowledge to conduct sound evaluation.
- Evaluation inevitably competes with more fundamental program activities for limited resources.
- Evaluation results can be misunderstood and misused, especially by program detractors (Wandersman et al., 2003).

These barriers often relegate evaluation to the fringes of an organization and the consequences are severe. If evaluation is viewed as an essential tool for determining whether program goals have been met, for generating knowledge in order to improve services, and for assuring accountability to supporters, then sidelining the process diminishes its potential, while straining relationships with funders and others promoting program evaluation.

How best to address the challenges involved in evaluation? First, one must build the capacity necessary to create what we call evaluation infrastructure. At the most general level, capacity building for nonprofit program staff involves strengthening nonprofits so they can better achieve their mission (De Vita and Fleming, 2001). Capacity building increases organizational strength across various dimensions (e.g., fundraising, board development, technology), which in turn contributes to increased program effectiveness. Evaluation capacity building specifically focuses on developing the knowledge and skills of nonprofit staff to participate in designing, implementing, and disseminating program evaluation research, and providing the technological tools that make evaluation possible.

Beyond capacity building, we suggest a new way of thinking about the process of research, one we call "mainstreaming evaluation." Put simply, we believe that nonprofits should incorporate the evaluation process into their everyday operations so that it becomes a regular part of the organization's work ethic, culture, and standard operating procedure at all levels of the agency (Sanders, 2003). Such an approach eliminates the tension between evaluation and programmatic operation, since evaluation ultimately becomes part of programmatic operation. Moreover, because evaluation is embedded into the mission of the agency, its costs are spread out over time and across staff. Evaluation is no longer a second cousin, tugging against and causing tensions within an organization. Rather, it becomes a regular part of what it means to provide services to clients and more generally, what it means to function as an organization.

We recognize, of course, that there are considerable start-up costs involved in mainstreaming evaluation in this way. Specific obstacles include:

- Program staff's lack of knowledge regarding the benefits and methodologies of evaluation.
- Concerns about the costs of evaluation.
- Perceived lack of evaluation training and leadership to guide staff in mainstreaming process.
- Perceived lack of control in the evaluation process and fears that it will yield research findings either irrelevant or damaging to the organization (Sanders, 2003).

Capacity building and mainstreaming were an important and explicit part of the design for the Solutions for America initiative, a two-year initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. Both were examined in the context of university-community research partnerships. A description of the initiative, of the research design, research findings, lessons, and recommendations follow.

Solutions for America: A Brief Overview

Solutions for America (Solutions) was a two-year (1999-2001) national research initiative of the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, a civic research organization based in Charlottesville, Va. Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Solutions sought to identify, document, and disseminate information about successful efforts to address tough challenges in communities across the country. Specifically, the initiative was designed to:

- Document successful solutions to critical community problems.
- Showcase the best of research and practice to national audiences.
- Increase the access communities have to practical knowledge about what works.
- Increase the capacity of community-based nonprofit organizations and local governments to conduct their own research and program evaluation.

Nineteen community organizations representing a range of issues were selected by an advisory board to participate in Solutions. The participating sites were:

Aiken, SC: Growing into Life—A Healthy Community Collaborative (infant mortality)
Arlington, TX: Dental Health for Arlington (access to dental services)
Big Ugly Creek, WV: Step by Step, Inc. (rural youth empowerment)
Boston, MA: Boston Main Streets (commercial revitalization)
Brockton, MA: MY TURN, Inc. (job training)
Burlington, VT: Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry/Vermont Development Credit Union (access to capital)
Cedar Rapids, IA: Neighborhood Transportation Services (job linkages)
Charlottesville, VA: City of Charlottesville (downtown revitalization)
Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (youth mentoring)
Jacksonville, FL: The Bridge of Northeast Florida (youth development)
Jacksonville, FL: Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (community issue analysis)
Los Angeles, CA: Beyond Shelter (homelessness)
Mankato, MN: Region Nine Healthy Communities Network (teen drug and alcohol use)
New York, NY: Children's Aid Society/Carmel Hill Project (comprehensive neighborhood revitalization)
Richmond, KY: Kentucky River Foothills Development Council (job training for women)
Santa Ana, CA: Taller San Jose (job preparation for Latino youth)
Shreveport, LA: Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal (neighborhood revitalization)
St. Louis, MO: FOCUS St. Louis (race relations)
Western North Carolina: HandMade in America (small town revitalization)

As part of the effort to document successful community strategies, Solutions implemented an innovative "hub-and-spoke" research design. Each of the 19 sites (the "spokes") identified a local research partner with whom they worked over the two-year period of the project. Eighteen of the 19 research teams included faculty from a local college or university. These local researchers, drawn from schools of social work and architecture and social science departments, worked with organization staff to design and implement a research strategy. The Pew Partnership contracted with each of the research teams, providing financial support for the local researchers, convening national meetings of researchers and program staff over the course of the project, and providing each site with an additional research fund to defray related expenses. The Pew Partnership also designated the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University to serve as the research "hub," coordinating the work of the local researchers and overseeing centralized data-gathering tasks.

Program staff and local researchers (the "research team") collaborated on each phase of the evaluation process. Beginning with identifying research questions and appropriate methodologies, followed by data collection, and analysis, each team customized the research to their individual programs. Teams were encouraged to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data over the two-year period. Teams submitted periodic reports updating the status of the research process to the research hub and a report of findings concluded the research project.

As a complement to the research being carried out by the research teams, we undertook a longitudinal evaluation of the research process. Key program staff members from each site, along with their associated local research partners, were surveyed by mail, phone, and over the Internet in the fall and winter of 2000, in the fall of 2001, and in the spring and summer of 2002. These sources provide a window into the processes of mainstreaming evaluation and capacity building with teams of university faculty and nonprofit agency staff. They also offer insight into what is needed to support these efforts and what the obstacles are, and, most important, what is the potential.

Research Findings

Overall Evaluations and Initial Motivations — Assessments of Solutions by program participants were unambiguously positive. As early as the first survey of site staff in the fall of 2000, 91 percent of participants rated their overall experience with the program as "excellent" or "very good" and 94 percent said they would be willing to participate in the program again. Four out of five program staff surveyed, even early on in the research process, agreed that participation in Solutions "has improved my organization's ability to conduct research." Sites were particularly enthusiastic about their local research partners, whom they saw as committed to their programs, able to work well with program staff, and instrumental for providing guidance and focus to the research effort. Among the local researchers, assessments were similarly positive. Two-thirds of those surveyed rated their experience with Solutions as "excellent" and all others considered it "very good." By the end of the program, nine out of 10 local researchers indicated that they would work with their local Solutions site again, and as of the most recent survey three-quarters of the sites had in fact continued their relationship with their local research partner after the conclusion of the initiative, even without the funding that had been provided by Solutions.

These positive assessments came even though the research undertaken as part of Solutions was a new experience for most participants, particularly staff at the 19 project sites. Not surprisingly, nearly three-quarters of staff members indicated that their organization had never participated in a project like Solutions, and for almost two-thirds working with a local researcher was a brand-new experience. Even for sites that had previously worked with an outside researcher in some capacity, the ongoing relationship between the Solutions local researcher and site throughout the project and the participatory nature of the hub-and-spoke research design were new.

Sites and researchers had distinct but overlapping reasons for deciding to participate in Solutions. For researchers, the opportunity to evaluate a local organization, to contribute to the local community in a new way, and to apply their research expertise to a real-world problem offered an opportunity to move beyond the regular confines of the university setting. "I was very interested in finding projects that formed a bridge between the university and the community," said one researcher. "Solutions offered a great opportunity for this." Similarly, another local research partner said that, for her, one of the primary motivations was "greater involvement in the community surrounding my academic institution." Other local researchers mentioned opportunities to integrate the evaluation into their own research and teaching, and the opportunity to "do good" on behalf of their university.

For sites, the opportunity to have their work evaluated and validated by an objective party, particularly one with the prestige of the Pew Partnership behind it, constituted the most important motivation for participation in Solutions. Three-quarters of staff members surveyed indicated that the "opportunity to have your work validated by an outside organization" was extremely important in the decision to participate in Solutions (another one-fifth said it was "somewhat" important). Site staff recognized their own existing but sometimes limited capacity to collect data and conduct program evaluation and in some cases considered such activities essential to service delivery. One staff member spoke of the "opportunity to conduct an evaluation of our programs," which "will help [the organization] improve services and better serve the community." From early on, the Solutions hub-and-spoke approach was designed to enhance the capacity of sites to conduct such program evaluation in a rigorous, objective fashion.

Finally, just as researchers sought to move beyond the university, site staff appeared eager to look beyond their own programs, both through their work with their local researcher as well as through the contacts made through national meetings and other Solutions-related activities. One staff member pointed to the opportunity to "get outside our own small world" in addition to the "credibility [and] opportunity for validation/evaluation in an objective manner" as important motivations for participating in Solutions. Similarly, reflecting on his experience at one of the national meetings, one site staff member commented, "I think what we really brought back was that there are people out there like us working to resolve a serious issue, even if it's not the same as ours, and we felt encouraged by that."

Benefits to Sites and Local Researchers — There was a strong connection between the sites' motivations for taking part in and the benefits they experienced from their participation. The validation that the research could confer upon the program, the learning of new research skills, and the prestige of being associated with a national initiative were listed both as considerations in the decision to participate and as benefits of participation. To a great extent Solutions lived up to participants' expectations and filled critical organizational needs.

An essential component of mainstreaming evaluation is the cultivation of a "culture of inquiry" among sites (Hernandez and Visher, 2001). Solutions required sites to engage in a sustained process of data-gathering and empirical analysis, through their work with the local researcher, through the demanding reporting requirements coordinated by the CUPR hub, and through the national meetings organized by the Pew Partnership. These activities served to enhance or inculcate a mindset in which research and evaluation were seen as integral program functions. By the end of the project, 83 percent of site staff indicated that they themselves and their organizations had developed positive attitudes toward evaluation research and had become convinced of its value. These attitudes were not merely concentrated among a few highly involved staff members, but trickled down (and up) throughout the agency. One staff member noted that Solutions had led to a "paradigm shift within our organization from the experience of integrating evaluation into our day-to-day practice."

Beyond such attitudinal changes, participation in the Solutions research yielded tangible informational gains as well. Nearly 85 percent of program staff agreed that the research revealed new information about their program, and more than three-quarters of staff members surveyed agreed that the research helped them implement new data collection methods and improved their organization's ability to conduct research. Survey respondents reported a high level of involvement in planning or designing the research and providing data to the research partner throughout Solutions.

Many staff members found the research to be helpful in validating their prior expectations about the effectiveness of their work. This "validation" was seen both as a source of motivation and inspiration for staff members and as a tool organizations could use in seeking out new funding. More than 80 percent of staff members surveyed reported "the research process has confirmed what my staff and I already knew about the program." One interviewee said that the research not only confirmed what the site staff had suspected, but it also reminded them to keep doing what was working. Several staffers noted that the research findings would be used to demonstrate to funders that "their money is well spent." Another interviewee indicated that his organization's participation in and the results that emerged from the research were "like getting a Good Housekeeping seal of approval that would allow us to go to funders, to go to our supporters ... and say that we have been looked at and have been found worthy."

Other staff members reported an increase in their organization's research capacity. Solutions research helped lead to improvements in existing data collection and analysis efforts, as well as to the introduction of new data gathering systems. For some organizations, participation helped facilitate improvements in client survey administration, and in focus group sessions; others reported advances in tracking program and client information. More important, these new data are not gathering dust, but are being put to good use. One program staffer explained that, at the conclusion of Solutions, the evaluation process had become more standardized and that "we're much more proactive about building in documentation" to ongoing program operations. Another staff member noted that the tools acquired through Solutions helped his site in "gathering data that's meaningful to the volunteers that we work with." "We're collecting better data, and we'll be able to use it better," said another, who described how his organization had always collected data in some form, but was now asking "new questions" and tracking responses to those questions longitudinally. For other sites, Solutions demonstrated what was particularly effective about program operations, and in some cases this new information helped lead to changes in program practices, such as adding new components to service delivery operations or expanding services to a wider group of clients or geographical area.

For site staff, Solutions was seen as beneficial not only in aiding the documentation of program successes and (sometimes), but also in stimulating dialogue and reflection about the program's objectives and mission. In addition to enhancing the research capacity of the 19 program sites, the research process more broadly encouraged a greater desire to reflect on program goals and practices.

Sites have gone on to use the research findings and their participation in Solutions in a number of other concrete ways, including organizational strategic planning sessions, fundraising activities, and sophisticated public relations efforts. One year into the project, more that three-quarters of project staff indicated that the research had helped stimulate dialogue and reflection among staff, board, and volunteers, and nearly 85 percent of staff believed that was helpful in clarifying program objectives. Since the conclusion of the program, nearly three-quarters of site staff members reported that their organization already had or was planning to make use of their participation in and the research findings in fundraising efforts. It is clear from these reports that the research findings are not sitting on bookshelves, but programs are applying those findings to their work and disseminating them internally and externally.

For their part, the local researchers seemed to find their work with the Solutions sites to be challenging, but engaging and ultimately satisfying in precisely the ways they had anticipated. As noted earlier, these researchers were eager to participate in real-world projects that got them out of the university setting and into the community. Participation in Solutions provided just such an experience. More than 40 percent of the researchers reported that they had been involved in a project like Solutions in the past, suggesting the willingness of the research community in general to take part in such projects. Many of the researchers were able to use their funding to hire research assistants; in all, 11 of the 19 research teams employed one or more research assistants, frequently graduate students working with the local researcher. Additionally, several researchers were able to incorporate their experience into their teaching. "The comprehensive nature of this project was challenging and a great learning tool," one researcher said. "I tend to talk about my research activities in my research and community practice classes, which helps make them relevant and alive to students."

Local researchers agreed with the assessments of site staff with regard to the benefits of participation in Solutions. When asked to discuss their impressions of what insights the site gleaned over the course of the project, researchers tended to mention at least one of three themes: that the site developed a greater understanding of aspects of the program such as service delivery and program outcomes; that the site learned about ways to improve the program; or that the site became more convinced about the need for research and evaluation. From both the researcher and site staff point of view, the research placed particular emphasis on and was particularly effective in helping sites evaluate program outcomes.

According to one local researcher, "the evaluation led to some important changes in the organization of the [program specifics]. It also gave the staff much deeper insight into how the program impacts [clients] and, they tell me, better tools for planning and thinking about what they want to accomplish. In their view, the impulse to reflection alone that was stimulated by the evaluation made the effort worthwhile."

Finally, sites and researchers together benefited from the funds available for research purposes. Five of the sites used these funds to invest in computer hardware, new software, or training for staff. Twelve sites used funds to defray costs associated with new data gathering tasks, such as survey interviews, focus groups, and data-entry. Other sites used the funds to prepare and disseminate their research findings.

Challenges — At times, Solutions was as demanding as it was innovative. Clear challenges emerged throughout the research process. Staff members and local researchers identified a series of hurdles that needed to be overcome; the most pressing of which were the availability of sufficient funding and staff time to devote to data collection and working with the research partner. In closed-ended questions asking site staff members about research challenges, more than half of respondents agreed "it was difficult to identify manageable methods of collecting data on program operations." In part this was a question of expertise and it was precisely this that the local researchers were able to provide. However, making data collection and analysis manageable also requires sufficient resources to conduct critical tasks such as client interviewing, data entry, and the preparation and dissemination of research reports. Here, the local researchers, particularly when aided by research assistants, were again able to subsidize some but certainly not all of the costs.

Staff time was clearly the most pressing challenge for many organizations. Several sites expressed a desire to have had access to additional funds to either compensate existing (often overworked) staff for their work on the research or to hire a new staff person specifically for the purposes of data collection and analysis. These concerns seemed most pressing at the beginning of the research process; one site staff member indicated, "We did not have adequate staff for data base design and data entry. We wasted time in the beginning on non-essential data issues." All told, more than a third of respondents disagreed with the statement: "there was sufficient staff and local researcher time available to implement the research process."

Some interviewees suggested that administrative and field staff feels the challenges of evaluation research differently. As one individual put it, "Personally, for me, [the research] is a joy, but I don't have to collect all the data." Usually the staff is "pretty overwhelmed" with their day-to-day activities, this interviewee reported, and some of them consider the data collection to be a burden "they could live without."

These challenges, however, tended to be mitigated by the strength of the relationship between the sites and the local research partner. Large majorities of researchers (at least 80 percent) agreed that site staff understood their role in the research effort; that they worked well with site staff; and that site staff were intellectually committed to the research effort. For their part, at least 80 percent of program staff respondents agreed that the research partner understood the organization's work, worked well with staff, and provided direction and focus to the research effort. One of the reasons that these partnerships appear to have worked so well is that each group brought a unique set of skills to bear. Local researchers who participated in Solutions were more intimately involved in analyzing and interpreting data and preparing reports, while site staff members reported more involvement in providing data to researchers. There seems to have been an informal division of labor between researchers and site staff, with each party more involved in completing some tasks than others. University researchers tended to be more involved in designing the research, analyzing and interpreting the data, and preparing reports for Solutions. Site staffers, in contrast, were more involved in data collection and staff training.

That researchers and staff members tended to agree on the nature of their relationship and that they overwhelmingly tended to work well together suggests that the parties experienced joint ownership of the research process and outcomes. However, in several cases such joint ownership was absent, communication between the researcher and program staff was poor, and in a small handful of cases sites and researchers got off to a rocky start and never fully recovered.

Despite the challenges the sites faced during the research process, in general most did not find the process to be overly burdensome. A number of factors enabled agencies and local governments to meet challenges successfully: the involvement and enthusiasm of organizational staff and board members, a high level of preparation and organization in the early stages of the research, the availability of the research fund provided by the Pew Partnership and a hands-on, engaged local researcher all helped to ease the burden of conducting program evaluation research. As a result, in each of two surveys, at least two-thirds of program staff reported a very low burden associated with participating in Solutions, and 84 percent of program respondents disagreed that "the data collection was too ambitious for my organization."

When it comes to mainstreaming evaluation research (i.e., continuing what began as part of Solutions) the related concerns of funding and staff time are paramount. As one interviewee put it, "finding the kind of resources that we had under Pew" will be a challenge to continuing the research. Another interviewee explained that he did not have the time or a staff person to devote to the research process at this time. There are, therefore, critical questions relating to the post-transition that remain to be addressed. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that, as noted earlier, nearly 94 percent of site staff members and 91 percent of local researchers indicated that they would participate in Solutions again, and that three-quarters of the sites are continuing some form of collaboration with their research partner.

Lessons and Recommendations

Can universities, foundations and funding agencies, local governments, and nonprofit organizations work together to mainstream research and evaluation while improving program operations? The lessons of *Solutions* suggest that the answer is yes, but challenges and questions remain.

- The hub and spoke model has real potential to bring together researchers and service providers from a single community. Together, these teams can foster a culture of inquiry, develop new and improved mechanisms for data gathering and analysis, and generate new information that serves to stimulate dialogue within organizations, improve program operations, and provide critical feedback to funders and other community stakeholders.

- Local researchers are the key to the hub and spoke model, but it is important to recognize the collaborative nature of the enterprise: the local researchers were not airdropped into the sites in order to gather data and report back to the hub. Rather, they worked hand-in-hand with program staff to integrate evaluation research into the regular operations of the agency. In most cases this process is on going, as witnessed by the three-quarters of sites that are continuing to work with their local researcher in some capacity.

- Funding agencies should recognize the potential for the local research partnership to provide valuable insight into program operations. Whether or not such partnerships are embedded in a full-blown hub and spoke model, funders can realize significant "bang for the buck" by building evaluation research into program operations with the help of a local, university-based researcher. The clear need in this regard is not only to support the efforts of the researcher, but also to provide ample staff, time, and resources to conduct the data gathering and analysis.

- Colleges and universities stand to gain by fostering collaboration between faculty members and community organizations. Certainly academic institutions can facilitate such research through salary support, but there are other steps that may be equally critical. Course load reduction is one important step that universities can take, as is the opportunity for faculty to combine this kind of research into pedagogical activities, such as graduate research seminars. Universities can also foster less tangible (but no less important) incentives, such as counting this kind of community-based research as service when it comes to tenure and promotion, and promoting such work within the institution. Just as many sites need to develop a culture of inquiry that values empirical research, so universities may need to adopt and communicate to faculty the position that this kind of research is valued within the institution.

- High-impact capacity building requires a "personal touch." The consultation, coaching, and hands-on assistance provided by the local researcher were customized to the agency's needs. Staff was involved in setting and implementing the research agenda, which translated into greater ownership and application of the research findings.

- Think broadly in terms of involvement. In order for evaluation research to become institutionalized in nonprofits and local governments, both executive and frontline staff must be involved in the research process from the start. Without a sense of involvement in and ownership over the research findings, staff may see the research process as a temporary add-on rather than a regular component of their program-related work. Our findings revealed a division of labor between site staff and local researchers, with the former more involved in high-level planning and implementation issues and the latter in the nitty-gritty of data collection. While an exclusively researcher-driven process risks isolating evaluation work as a job performed by necessity and not choice, encouraging the involvement of executive and frontline staff can help inculcate attitudes favorable to mainstreaming evaluation.

- Face time matters. Research partnerships must not take place exclusively through phone conversations and e-mail correspondence, but must include some face-to-face time involving all stakeholders. The benefits that emerged from the Solutions research process were largely dependent on the quality of the relationships forged between local researchers and site staff. Our findings showed that face-to-face meetings were seen as the most productive form of communication between the research partners. Telephone calls and electronic correspondence offer convenient ways of keeping in frequent contact, but in-person meetings are essential to the researcher-staff relationship.

- Rigor is valued. Solutions program staff consistently voiced a desire for the research to be credible and for high standards. Nonprofit organizations often lack the requisite time and expertise to successfully design and implement an evaluation that would withstand close scrutiny. Even in situations where program staff had an instinctual sense of program results, they sought stronger evidence and deeper knowledge about their work. The academic credentials and expertise of the local research partner injects a high level of credibility to the research findings.

- Give program staff and researchers the opportunity to identify, discuss, and reflect on what didn't work. A research process that supports dialogue and reflection about what didn't work in terms of program outcomes, that can identify missteps, and that can pinpoint areas of weakness was important to program staff. Such a focus contributes to program improvement and can create a positive learning environment. For the local research partner, being able to approach the research with an eye toward lessons about what didn't work means that loss of objectivity is minimized.

- Plan for dissemination early on. Since the conclusion of Solutions, sites have gone on to use the research findings and their participation in the program in a number of other concrete ways, including strategic planning sessions, fundraising activities, and sophisticated public relations efforts. The research findings are not sitting on bookshelves; rather, agencies and local governments are applying those findings to their work and disseminating them both internally and externally. Building into the research design a commitment to reflecting on the results of the evaluation process and disseminating those results to interested audiences can help give both staff and local researchers a sense of the importance and reach of their work, even beyond immediate program objectives.

- Make time to connect the dots. While evaluation research is typically a focused and narrowly defined process, the research findings present a natural opportunity for both parties to discuss and reflect on the relationships between program outcomes and other related community issues. For the nonprofit organization, this may be an assessment of how their work is connected to other pressing community needs. In the case of the faculty researcher, this may be a matter of thinking about how connections between other department and disciplines can inform future research.

Conclusion

The process of building university-community research partnerships requires the time, energy, and motivation of program staff and faculty over the long term. Obstacles are a reality and several have been discussed in this article. However, beyond the issues related to process it is crucial to keep sight of the short and long-term promise of these alliances. In the short term, partnerships are a valuable resource for strengthening agency operations and furthering their organization's civic mission. In the long term, research partnerships build and enhance the capacity of both parties. Faculty gain deeper knowledge and perspective of the community and its challenges. Program staff acquires knowledge of research design and implementation, and become savvier when analyzing research findings. Ultimately university-community partnerships play a role in strengthening the civic fabric of their communities.

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