



Measuring Impact: Practical Strategies for Nonprofit Organizations

A White Paper

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Executive Summary

For many community-based organizations (CBOs), a strong foundation for sustainable growth lies in their ability to demonstrate evidence of impact. In a funding landscape driven by metrics, programs that can demonstrate measurable results are more likely to secure funding. CBOs and philanthropic foundations are increasingly asked to demonstrate impact rather than intention.¹

While some funders have streamlined reporting in recent years, especially in response to nonprofit advocacy, many organizations—particularly those receiving government funding—continue to navigate varied and sometimes complex reporting formats. Funders, boards, and perhaps most importantly, communities, will often still look for evidence that their support (even when unrestricted) enables meaningful, measurable progress.

This white paper outlines cost-conscious, accessible strategies for measuring impact, particularly for organizations without full-time evaluation staff or complex data systems. Whether measuring educational progress, food insecurity reduction, program improvement, or community engagement, the goal remains consistent: To use existing data and organizational capacity to convey credible and compelling results that demonstrate positive impact.

WhitworthKee Consulting (WKC) assists CBOs, foundations, and other organizations in developing practical impact measurement systems that support collaboration, program improvement, and sustainability. In this paper, we:

- describe common challenges and provide feasible solutions,
- identify data sources commonly collected by nonprofits,
- provide tailored examples across different service areas, and
- recommend tools suited to various budgets and technical capacities.

With strategic planning and appropriate tools, even teams with competing priorities and limited time or capacity can document meaningful progress, respond to funder and community expectations, and guide internal improvements.

¹ Center for Effective Philanthropy. (2023). *State of Nonprofits 2023*. <https://cep.org/portfolio/state-of-nonprofits-2023/>

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Introduction

The demand for impact measurement continues to rise.² Yet, for many community-based organizations (CBOs) and small philanthropic foundations, the ask to document outcomes comes amid constrained budgets, limited staff, and shifting program priorities. Despite these constraints, demonstrating effectiveness remains essential for continued funding, program growth, and public and community accountability.

The landscape has evolved dramatically in recent years. Donors and institutional funders increasingly seek sophisticated impact data to guide their investments and ensure long-term value. At the same time, many organizations face ongoing constraints in evaluation capacity, highlighting the importance of intentional, collaborative support in this area.³ These dynamics are especially relevant as federal and state funding becomes less predictable due to recent shifts in funding priorities.

With the recent rise of some funders moving from funding specific programs or projects to general operating support,⁴ there may be an increased demand to focus on funders' contributions to supporting efforts rather than attributing specific outcomes—emphasizing the overall effect of their giving rather than isolating specific outcomes. Even in this context, organizations that can clearly articulate the impact of investments are more likely to secure long-term, more stable funding.⁵

Impact measurement does not necessarily require high-cost software, complex data collection systems, or dedicated evaluation teams. In most cases, organizations already collect substantial data; the challenge lies in

DEFINITIONS

- Output** – The immediate activities or services delivered by a program (e.g., number of workshops held, meals distributed).
- Outcome** – The short- to medium-term changes that result from those activities (e.g., increased knowledge, improved health behaviors, job placement).
- Impact** – The longer-term, sustained changes at the community or systems level (e.g., improved graduation rates, reduced homelessness).
- Indicator** – A specific, measurable sign of progress toward an outcome (e.g., % of participants employed after training).

These terms are often used interchangeably, but shared definitions help ensure alignment across teams, partners, and funders.

² Benjamin, L. M., Ebrahim, A., & Gugerty, M. K. (2022). Nonprofit organizations and the evaluation of social impact: A research program to advance theory and practice. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 52(1_suppl), 5S–27S. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640221123590>

³ Gopal, R., & Clarke, T. (2020). *Drowning in data*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

⁴ Center for Effective Philanthropy. (2024). *State of nonprofit-funder relationships: What funders need to know*. <https://cep.org/report-backpacks/state-of-nonprofits-2024-what-funders-need-to-know/>

⁵ Brest, P., & Harvey, H. (2020). *Money well spent: A strategic plan for smart philanthropy* (2nd ed.). Stanford University Press.

organizing and interpreting these data to inform decisions and communicate outcomes.

This white paper offers a practical roadmap for organizations seeking to assess their work in a realistic, mission-aligned manner. The strategies outlined here are offered to support both CBOs and philanthropic foundations that operate without the infrastructure of large-scale evaluation departments or dedicated full-time evaluation staff.

The Case for Measuring Impact

Impact measurement provides multiple organizational benefits, including:

- **Program refinement and informed resource allocation:** By tracking outcomes over time, organizations can identify what works and redirect efforts where needed.
- **Improved ability to secure and retain funding:** Funders increasingly prioritize evidence-based investments.⁶ Demonstrating measurable impact enhances competitiveness in funding applications but also reinforces an organization's reputation as a reliable steward of resources.
- **Greater accountability to communities served:** Measuring and sharing progress ensures organizations remain aligned with community priorities, fostering trust and transparency.⁷
- **Data-informed internal decision making:** Impact metrics can guide program design, staffing, and budgeting decisions.
- **Sharing effective practices across the field:** Well-documented results support knowledge sharing and help elevate effective strategies across peer organizations.

What Do We Mean by Impact?

Impact refers to the measurable, longer-term difference an organization makes in the lives of individuals, communities, or systems. It goes beyond outputs and short-term outcomes to demonstrate real change. Funders increasingly seek this level of evidence to guide investments and assess effectiveness—making clear, mission-aligned impact a strategic advantage.

⁶ Nielsen, J. G., Lueg, R., & van Liempd, D. (2019). Managing multiple logics: The role of performance measurement systems in social enterprises. *Sustainability*, 11(8), 2327. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11082327>

⁷ Johnson Center for Philanthropy. (2023). *The public is increasingly holding nonprofits accountable*. <https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/the-public-is-holding-nonprofits-accountable-to-living-their-mission-and-values/>

Measuring impact is not merely a bureaucratic requirement; it is a tool for learning, improvement, and advocacy. When staff understand the tangible results of their work, morale improves and teams become more aligned around common goals.⁸

For CBOs delivering frontline services—such as housing, public health, workforce development, and education—impact data allow teams to replace anecdotal accounts with verifiable trends.⁹ This not only strengthens external communication but also supports program refinement and sustainability. For small philanthropic foundations that provide funding to other organizations, for example, impact data can inform grantmaking decisions, provide feedback loops for grantees, and contribute to broader field learning.

Measuring impact provides a foundation for transparency and trust, enabling organizations to remain mission-aligned while demonstrating effectiveness to external partners. When done correctly, it supports better decisions, stronger partnerships, and long-term sustainability.

Barriers to Measuring Impact

Although measuring impact is incredibly important, CBOs, foundations, and other organizations may face one or more of the following challenges:

- **Limited staff capacity:** Evaluation responsibilities are often assigned to team members who have competing program duties and other responsibilities, leaving minimal time or opportunity to organize and analyze existing data and later interpret and apply findings.
- **Fragmented data systems:** Information and data may be scattered across multiple formats ranging from spreadsheets and emails to hard-copy forms, making it difficult to compile or analyze trends over time.
- **Pressure to produce short-term results:** Funders often expect immediate or near-term outcomes, even when the nature of the work involves long-term or systemic change that is harder to quantify within short reporting cycles.
- **Lack of clearly defined metrics:** Programs may struggle to identify which indicators best reflect their intended outcomes, particularly when metrics must be tailored to specific sectors, populations, or systems-level goals.

⁸ Carvajal, A., Sanchez, R., & Amihan, S. (2023). Probing the seven qualities of true leadership: A qualitative investigation of selected experienced and successful leaders in various industries. *International Journal of Open-Access, Interdisciplinary & New Educational Discoveries of ETCOR Educational Research Center*. <https://etcor.org>

⁹ Kim, M., Charles, C., & Pettijohn, S. (2019). Challenges in the use of performance data in management: Results of a national survey of human service nonprofit organizations. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 42(5), 1085–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2018.1523107>

- **Varying reporting requirements:** Partner organizations, government agencies, and funders frequently use diverse reporting methods—from comprehensive and standard templates to more streamlined templates and verbal check-ins. However, regardless of the complexity of reporting requirements, organizations may still need to adapt their existing data and outcome metrics to meet varying funder expectations.^{10,11}

These barriers are real—but not insurmountable. Many mission-driven organizations have succeeded by starting small: focusing on just one or two key outcome areas, using data they already collect, and building from there. By setting reasonable expectations and focusing on strategic goals, organizations can adopt a right-sized approach to evaluation that supports continuous improvement and strengthens communication with funders and community partners.

Low-Burden, High Value Strategies

Organizations do not necessarily need to begin with new data collection processes; instead, they can start by maximizing the value of information already in their possession. These initial actions—such as reviewing existing intake forms, attendance logs, or survey data—help build a foundation for evaluation efforts that are realistic, affordable, and aligned with the organization's mission.

Recommended strategies include:

- **Review existing information:** Conduct an internal audit of what information and data are already collected, including application forms, intake assessments, attendance records, and periodic surveys. In many cases, data needed for impact assessment are already gathered for administrative, tracking, or compliance purposes.¹²

After identifying what data are already available, teams can apply the following strategies to translate that information into useful insights:

- **Interpret for insight:** Encourage teams to regularly ask, "What do these data suggest about participant progress or program effectiveness?" and "What information is still needed to understand this story?" Data should be

¹⁰ Ewuru, B. (2024, Nov. 21). *How to balance flexibility and accountability in grant management*. Good Grants.

¹¹ Center for Effective Philanthropy. (2023). *State of Nonprofits 2023*. <https://cep.org/portfolio/state-of-nonprofits-2023/>

¹² Martin, C., & Pesenti, C. (2024). The organizational effectiveness of third sector organizations: A dialogic-participatory action research in a regional food bank. *Relational Social Work*, 8(1), 1–15.

examined not only for compliance but also for the stories told through the use of data that demonstrate desired outcomes.

- **Select focus areas:** Rather than trying to quantify every aspect of a program, make it manageable to avoid burdening staff, focus on one or two critical outcomes most aligned with the program’s objectives. Emphasizing core metrics helps ensure that analysis remains manageable, meaningful, and user-friendly.
- **Use direct language:** Articulate goals and metrics using clear, accessible terms. For example, instead of describing results with abstract constructs such as “empowerment” or “community well-being,” define success using specific, observable outcomes that reflect real change.

The following table provides examples of how broad or abstract terms can be reframed as specific, observable metrics to support clearer communication and outcome tracking.

Table 1: Translating Abstract Concepts into Measurable Metrics

Abstract Construct	Specific, Observable Metric
Empowerment	% of participants who report increased confidence in decision-making
Community well-being	% reduction in emergency service use or food pantry visits
Leadership development	# of participants who take on leadership roles in local groups
Community Engagement	Event attendance rates or volunteer sign-up frequency
Capacity-building	% increase in partner organizations reporting improved service delivery

Using clear, measurable metrics in place of abstract language builds confidence among staff, partners, and the community and provides early signs that the organization’s work is making a tangible difference—laying the groundwork for long-term impact. As confidence and capacity increase, organizations can expand their evaluation efforts with greater precision and sophistication.

Using Existing Data to Measure and Communicate Impact

As introduced earlier, reviewing what data your organization already collects is often the best place to begin. Many CBOs and foundations already gather rich program data—intake forms, surveys, and attendance logs—without fully leveraging it. Table 2 offers a snapshot of common sources and how they can be repurposed to support evaluation.

Intake forms, attendance logs, and post-event surveys often contain valuable insights. With the right approach, existing data can support stronger reporting, improved decision-making, and better communication with funders.

Table 2: Existing Data Sources That Can Be Used for Evaluation

Data Source	What It Can Show
Attendance Logs	Participation trends, retention, drop-off points
Surveys (pre/post)	Changes in knowledge, attitudes, or satisfaction
Intake Forms	Demographics served, needs identified
Case Notes	Individual progress and contextual stories
Program Activity Logs	Service frequency, service types, time investment
Budget/Expenditure Data	Cost per participant, program efficiency
Referral Tracking	Partnerships activated, cross-agency collaboration

Measurement Frameworks for Small Teams

Developing a clear and intentional measurement framework is essential for any organization, especially those with limited time, staff, or budget. Rather than attempting to measure everything, organizations should focus on the most meaningful outcomes aligned with their mission. While logic models have traditionally provided a structured framework for defining program activities and outcomes, many organizations now turn to broader approaches like Theory of Change or Theory of Action. For complex systems work, emerging frameworks such as Michael Quinn Patton’s Blue Marble Evaluation emphasize principles-based evaluation over fixed indicators—particularly when working across boundaries or

addressing dynamic change.¹³ Choosing a right-sized framework—whether structured or flexible—helps teams stay focused on what matters most and ensures that evaluation efforts remain both purposeful and feasible.

One area that guiding frameworks have in common is clearly defined outcomes. These outcomes are supported by specific indicators that help organizations assess progress and communicate results. The following table includes program areas on which organizations might be interested in understanding their impact. We also offer sample metrics and potential existing sources organizations may have to measure impact in the example program areas to encourage readers to lean into creative ways to leverage their existing data to support measurement frameworks.

Table 3: Sample Metrics by Program Type

Program Area	Sample Metric	Potential Data Source
After-school Tutoring	% of students improving at least 1 letter grade	Report cards; teacher progress reports
Workforce Training	% of participants placed in jobs within 90 days	Job placement tracking; follow-up surveys
Food Assistance	Average number of meals per household per month	Pantry distribution logs
Youth Mentoring	% of youth reporting increased self-confidence	Post-program self-assessments; interviews
Community Health	% increase in access to preventive services	Intake forms; referral tracking logs

These examples are meant to guide organizations in identifying outcome areas that align with SMART goal principles: outcomes that are specific, measurable, and feasible to track over time. Programs serving different populations or working at varying scales may need to adapt or further refine these metrics. The key is to **begin with metrics that reflect your organization’s core goals** and to collect data in a manner that is consistent and realistic given the organization’s resources.

Even basic frameworks can help teams stay aligned, ensure consistent reporting, and use data more effectively in their planning and decision-making. Over time, such frameworks also allow organizations to observe patterns, identify where adjustments are needed, and demonstrate growth or success more credibly to funders and partners.

¹³ Patton, M Q. (2019). *Blue marble evaluation: Premises and principles*. Guilford Press.

Transforming Impact Measurement into Strategic Advantage

Innovative measurement specialists have pioneered practical, right-sized frameworks that satisfy funders while simultaneously strengthening programs. These measurement experts have guided numerous nonprofits through the metrics maze, helping them secure sustainable funding based on meaningful outcomes rather than superficial metrics.

The most effective partners combine technical expertise with an understanding of nonprofit realities, including limited staff capacity, complex social challenges, and growing expectations for high-quality evaluation within tight budgets. Their tailored approaches bridge this persistent gap, transforming measurement from a burden into a strategic advantage.

Many organizations benefit from working with experienced evaluation partners who can co-design systems that reflect their unique capacity, context, and funding environment. WhitworthKee Consulting works alongside and in partnership with CBOs and philanthropic organizations to build sustainable evaluation strategies grounded in sector expertise, technical fluency, and practical implementation.

Based on our experience, Table 4 outlines common challenges and examples of how we—or a like-minded measurement partner—can support organizations in building systems that are both meaningful and manageable.

Table 4: What to Expect from a Measurement Partner

Challenge or Need	How Evaluation Partners Address These Needs
Limited internal evaluation staff	Collaborative tools and templates for low-burden tracking
Tight funding cycles	Grant-ready language and metrics for proposals
Funder/Partner pressure for sophisticated data	Clear outcome frameworks that exceed expectations
Overwhelmed program teams	Streamlined systems that fit within existing operations

The right measurement partner can help translate evaluation into a practical tool for organizational sustainability and growth, built on credible data, aligned with funder expectations, and designed to work within daily operations.

A skilled partner helps simplify your approach, align metrics with funder expectations, and reduce the burden on staff. WhitworthKee works with organizations to build systems that are clear, useful, and sustainable.

Conclusion: From Measurement to Meaningful Action

Impact measurement is not about perfection—it is about progress and continuous learning. For mission-driven organizations with limited time and resources, practical and right-sized strategies can yield insights that improve programming and build credibility.

Scalable approaches for tracking outcomes help organizations move beyond compliance toward a culture of intentional reflection and informed decision making. The most effective systems grow alongside the organization, starting with the most salient outcomes, focusing on what matters most, and adapting over time.

Even straightforward measurement practices can lead to meaningful change. For teams facing diminished public resources and intensifying demands to justify impact, these practices offer more than just documentation—they are a path toward greater sustainability, clearer communication, and stronger funding alignment. By aligning routine program data with outcomes, organizations are better positioned to sustain funding, expand programs, and influence policy.

WhitworthKee Consulting partners with organizations to design practical, sustainable systems that help them utilize existing data more strategically. We believe every mission-driven team deserves access to tools and support that help them demonstrate their impact with clarity and confidence.

If your organization would like to brainstorm ways to use existing data to tell your story, we invite you to connect with us. Contact us at info@whitworthkee.com or visit www.whitworthkee.com to learn more about our capabilities and staff.

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