The Practices of Evaluating Impact in Idaho Nonprofits

STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SECTOR INTERVIEWS

THE NONPROFIT CENTER, A PROGRAM OF THE IDAHO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE M. J. MURDOCK CHARITABLE TRUST AND DIALOGUES IN ACTION

A Qualitative Study of Idaho Nonprofits

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Introduction

Nonprofits are increasingly asked to show what difference their work makes, and most of their leaders want to know the answer as much as any funder does. Evaluation is also where many leaders feel least equipped — unsure what to measure, short on time and tools, and wary of methods that miss the work they care about most.

The purpose of this study was to understand how Idaho nonprofit leaders think about and practice their evaluation of impact: where momentum is building, where gaps remain, and what would help for the future. What follows summarizes the findings from the study, the strengths and challenges that emerged, and recommendations for funders, capacity-builders, and nonprofit leaders.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This report draws on twenty interviews with Idaho nonprofit leaders, building on the 2024 Nonprofit Capacity Survey, which identified evaluation as both a top need and a relative weakness for nonprofits across the Northwest. Participants were selected to represent the breadth of the sector — across geographies, organizational sizes, and mission areas. Interviews were conducted by the Nonprofit Center and Dialogues In Action. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. The findings and recommendations represent the insights from the interviews

Summary

Across twenty interviews, a consistent picture comes through: Idaho's nonprofit leaders care about evaluating and communicating their impact. They believe in the power of evaluation, and many are uneasy about how little of it they actually manage to do. For most, there is a significant gap between what they value and aspire to and what they practice.

At the same time, the practice of evaluation is growing. Leaders are pairing numbers with narrative more deliberately than they once did, and letting data change what their organizations do rather than only what they report. They are building layered listening systems, borrowing methods from peers, widening the range of voices they hear, and pushing back on narrow definitions of success. Across the sector, evaluation is maturing.

This report sets out what Idaho nonprofits do well, what they cannot yet do, what they think evaluation is for, and what stands in their way. It closes with recommendations aimed at the parts of the system best placed to change the conditions holding the sector back.

Part One: Six Findings on the State of Evaluation Capacity

FINDING 1:

Evaluation is universally aspirational and almost universally under-resourced

Every organization in this study reports a gap between the evaluation work they believe they should be doing and what they can actually get done. A one-person mountain foundation has no bandwidth to design systematic data collection; a rural mental health coalition watches its evaluation intentions get derailed by direct service; a diaper bank has built sophisticated tracking but can't turn it into fundraising material. What's missing isn't desire or dedication — it's capacity.

Most of these organizations are doing something: compliance data, post-service surveys, and team debriefs. What they can't yet do is run evaluation as a coherent, sustained function — designing good instruments, training staff, protecting time for analysis, turning findings into action. The constraint is not mainly money, although money is part of it. It is the capacity of their organizational system: too few people, too little time, too little specialized skill, no protected hours, and a funding environment that pays for programs but not for the infrastructure that would show whether those programs work.

> "We have only recently been in a position where I wasn't losing sleep over how I was going to make payroll next month. Our organization is like a startup, even though we've been around since '91."
>
> — A MENTAL HEALTH AFFILIATE

FINDING 2:

Idaho nonprofit leaders have a greater desire for evaluation than they have a practice of it

One of the clearest patterns in the data is the difference between what leaders want to do and what they have the capability to do. In addition to capacity, nonprofits desire greater capability. Their vulnerability is not primarily a lack of belief in the value and utility of evaluation. An arts council director frames evaluation as a source of strength rather than a chore; a housing-first organization speaks fluently about North Star metrics and the limits of measuring any single intervention; a land trust has done the hard work of realizing its old metrics measured the wrong things. The struggle is about skills, methodology, aptitude, and implementation, not commitment.

That gap breeds a low-grade, chronic frustration — leaders know what they should be doing, but experience a deficit in the knowledge and skills for how to do it. Some interpret this as personal leadership failure rather than a condition of the whole sector, especially in mental health, recovery, and child welfare, where the stakes feel particularly high. Idaho nonprofits mostly need help closing the gap between their desire to evaluate impact and their ability to design and implement evaluation of impact.

FINDING 3:

Evaluation is used in various ways and for various purposes

Running through nearly every interview is the evaluation, for these leaders, is rarely about evaluation for its own sake. It is almost always in the service of something else. The purpose and intended use of the evaluation determine much of the design and approach.

Five purposes recur throughout the interviews. Evaluation feeds fundraising, where client stories of impact are often the single most powerful donor tool. It satisfies compliance — Medicaid questionnaires, mandated state forms — and here it is frequently something done to the organization rather than by it, with data flowing out and rarely coming back. It drives persuasion, the case to legislators, funders, and businesses that the work matters. It powers the design of programs and interventions, as when a coalition shifted its education series from monthly to quarterly on community feedback. And for a smaller number, it supports meaning-making — conversation and consideration about the evidence that the work is worth doing. These purposes aren't mutually exclusive, and most organizations pursue several at once. But having multiple purposes often strains the attention of the staff and complicates the evaluation design.

> "We just shared a fall donor report that had a really powerful statement from a client about how impactful our work had been, and two people reached out to me and said, let me give you some money."
>
> — A MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

FINDING 4:

An evaluation literacy problem is behind what looks like a resource problem

What looks like a resource problem is often a literacy problem. Many organizations already have more data and tools than they use — databases they are not yet fully leveraging, a CRM, and national benchmarking data they have yet to translate into a case for donors, and funder metrics that have turned out to measure the wrong things. Many leaders report that they have plenty of data inputs, but that their data are not as helpful as they want them to be. They are challenged to sharpen and elevate their methodology and approach: designing good metrics, telling measurement apart from meaning, turning numbers into a narrative worth hearing, and knowing what not to measure.

Part of the problem is the lack of investment in evaluation literacy in the sector. One children's services leader noted that every nonprofit swallows the cost of a financial audit because the culture expects it, while almost none has any equivalent expectation around evaluating impact. The infrastructure is absent, the expectations are absent, and neither is the investment in developing the aptitude to evaluate impact across the nonprofit sector.

> "Usually you have an evaluation department, the same way you have a finance department, the same way you have an HR department. That evaluation team is tasked to run the organizational evaluation every year, the same way you do an audit."
>
> — A CHILDREN'S SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FINDING 5:

The data Idaho nonprofits are often asked to collect are not always the data they want

What many organizations track is largely set from the outside — grant reporting, state mandates, Medicaid documentation, national affiliate templates — and those metrics are not often where leaders believe their real impact lies. A housing organization tracks what its grants require but wants to show sustainable housing and long-term cost savings; a land trust spent years counting acres preserved and dollars raised before realizing those weren't the right indicators; an early learning organization wants to show businesses the economic value of childcare, which no system it has captures.

This misalignment is built into how nonprofit evaluation is funded and mandated. The people paying for it define the measures, and what they want to know is not always what the organization most needs to know. The result is a double burden: limited capacity spent on metrics leaders are not choosing, leaving even less for the evaluation they believe in. A modest change on the funder side — sharing back what they collect, broadening what counts as evidence, co-creating metrics that matter to both the funder and the agency — could ease this tension considerably.

> "We would turn in those completed forms once a month, and then we would never get them back to see how people scored, or how they were progressing."
>
> — A RECOVERY CENTER

FINDING 6:

Capacity varies by organizational type, geography, and life stage

Capacity is uneven across the state. A few patterns stand out. Size and life stage matter, but not predictably — even established organizations report startup-like fragility in their evaluation. A national parent can supply tools and frameworks that an affiliate could not build alone, though they tend to be designed for the average affiliate rather than for the Idaho context. Geography shapes the problem: rural and small-community organizations cannot rely on email-dependent outreach, and reaching underrepresented people requires relationship work that stretches staff capacity to sustain. Mission shapes it, too: a housing-first organization knows what success looks like, while a land trust works toward outcomes that unfold over decades and do not fit a one-year reporting cycle. Leadership transitions are inflection points as well, because capacity typically rests more on one committed person than on institutional culture or structure.

Strengths and Challenges

Part One traced the structural conditions. In practice, they show up as a set of strengths the sector is building on and challenges that hold it back — all against a backdrop of an uncertain political and funding climate that makes long-term investment in evaluation feel risky at the very moment its value would be greatest. The most important of each is summarized below.

Areas of Strength

- **Pairing numbers with narrative.** Leaders increasingly treat statistics and stories as essential to the picture of impact, layering surveys, site visits, photography, testimonies, and financial trend lines into a single account of impact.

- **Letting data change programs.** Several use evaluations to make consequential programmatic decisions rather than just fill out reports — extending a summer program based on parent feedback, and scaling back sites the data showed were underperforming.

- **Building layered feedback channels.** Some design evaluation around several inputs at once — tiered review structures, partner tracking paired with external need data — so no single instrument has to carry the whole picture.

- **Learning from peers.** Leaders in peer networks borrow methods, share data, and improve their practices by learning from one another.

- **Widening whose voice counts.** Leaders are treating representativeness as central to whether an evaluation is valid, taking concrete steps — such as interpretation, translation, and direct engagement with underrepresented communities — to hear from the people their surveys miss.

- **Reflecting as a team.** Several have built simple, durable habits of pausing to examine their own work — structured post-event debriefs, quarterly scorecard reviews — moving evaluation into the team's working life rather than leaving it in reports filed elsewhere.

> "We're great at numbers. We're getting better at stories."
>
> — A FOOD-SYSTEMS ORGANIZATION

Areas of Challenge

- **Time and bandwidth.** Organizations run in near-constant triage, so evaluation happens in hindsight if at all — and the time, energy, and emotional toll of the work magnifies every other challenge.

- **Fragmented data systems.** Leaders have tools but lack a coherent infrastructure: a patchwork of platforms built for different purposes, disconnected.

- **The data-to-narrative gap.** Even organizations with strong data struggle to turn numbers into a case that donors, funders, and policymakers can actually hear.

- **No line of sight on lasting outcomes.** Leaders want to know whether change is held a year or three years out, but the methods, permissions, and resources are missing. The strongest claims they want to make are the ones their data cannot yet support.

- **Funder–organization misalignment.** Leaders spend energy and effort in the work of bridging what funders count and what they know matters.

- **Thin capacity and uneven buy-in.** Most organizations have no one whose main job is evaluation, and the work often rests on a single champion, which stalls the moment that person leaves, gets pulled away, or burns out.

> “It’s really difficult with a small staff, just running from one event to the next event to the next event, to really take the time to think about, well, how would we evaluate that?”
>
> — AN ARTS ORGANIZATION

Recommendations

The recommendations below are aimed at the parts of the system with the most leverage to improve the value of evaluation in the sector.

For Funders

- **Fund evaluation capacity itself.** Treat evaluation as a fundable line item — staff time, training, database integration.

- **Close the feedback loop on required reporting.** Share aggregated data back with the organizations that collected it, so reporting becomes a source of learning instead of a one-way submission.

- **Broaden what counts as evidence.** Narrow measures often distort the work. Let richer forms of evidence count alongside the required metrics, especially for organizations whose outcomes play out over far longer horizons than an annual report can capture.

- **Convene grantees for evaluation-focused peer conversations.** Cross-organization learning already happens informally in some communities. Funders are well placed to give it structure and build on the gains peer borrowing is already producing.

> "A state legislator might say success is when they're fully integrated and a full taxpayer. To me, success is they got up in the morning, showered, and got ready for a job."
>
> — A DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT ORGANIZATION

For Capacity-Builders

- **Build training that addresses the data-to-narrative gap.** Most leaders know how to collect data; far fewer know how to turn it into impact statements that donors, businesses, and policymakers can hear.

- **Offer practical guidance on metric design.** The sector needs frameworks for what constitutes credible data, how to design indicators that align with an organization's actual theory of change, and how to handle qualitative outcomes.

- **Develop time-respecting formats.** Short modules, peer cohorts, embedded coaching, and on-demand support.

- **Create peer learning communities focused specifically on evaluation.** Leaders benefit greatly from sharing evaluation approaches with each other. Convening them around evaluation could maximize the positive moment in the sector.

For Nonprofit Leaders

- **Build a regular team reflection rhythm.** Brief post-event debriefs, quarterly scorecard reviews, and a structured reflection slot in staff meetings all count as evaluation — and over time they shift the culture more durably than any one-time training.

- **Treat evaluation as everyone's work.** Write specific evaluation responsibilities into each role and connect them to staff development, so the work is shared instead of resting on one internal champion.

- **Be deliberate about hearing from those who do not show up in standard channels.** Investing in translation, outreach, and relationship-building with the people you're not reaching is what turns diverse-voice work from an aspiration into a practice.

- **Seek a multi-modal approach to data and evaluation.** Build the capacity to treat qualitative data as credibly as quantitative data. The most convincing pictures of impact in this study come from organizations that have learned to weave the two together.

Conclusion

Idaho nonprofits are working in a condition you might call evaluation-aware scarcity. They understand what evaluation is for, they believe in it, and in many cases, they have more raw inputs than they're using. What they lack is the time, skill, infrastructure, and protected space to turn evaluation activity into evaluation practice — and that practice into organizational learning and a case the outside world can hear. The sector doesn't need to be talked into evaluating its impact; its leaders already want to.

The leaders in this study are thoughtful, mission-driven, and self-aware. The conditions they work in are not built to let them evaluate their impact effectively. If Idaho wants its nonprofit sector to show its impact more clearly, the work is less about pushing the organizations harder and more about changing those conditions — funding models, how time is allocated, talent pipelines, peer learning infrastructure, and the fit between what gets required and what is worth knowing.

M.J. Murdock
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