HOW SOCIOLOGY CAN SUPPORT NONPROFITS

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This primer provides an overview of the ways in which the expertise and training of sociologists can directly contribute to and enhance the work of nonprofit organizations and community groups.

Nonprofits and sociologists often use different language to describe similar activities, so the overlap of their work is not always apparent. This primer is geared toward:

- Professional sociologists- To help you better understand how your work aligns with nonprofit activities and how you can add to the capacity of nonprofit organizations.
- Sociology students- So you can understand how your training and degree can translate to the nonprofit job sector.
- Nonprofits and community groups- To learn how working with sociologists can add capacity to your organization.

Grants

Grant Writing: To receive a grant, it is important to provide strong evidence that the activity requiring money will be efficient and effective. This requires a strong narrative, supported by data. Useful data can include secondary research about a population or in some cases primary research into the needs of a community

Grant Reporting: Many grants require regular reporting on funded activities. Some require basic data on services and participants, while others require full program evaluations.

So how can sociologists help with funding?

we have research training & experience that can be very helpful!

Grant Writing:

Sociologists can provide background research to support a nonprofit's proposed activities or help organizations quantify and describe the level need in their community by using sociological research skills, such as:

- Literature Reviews
- Demographic data collection
- Analysis of existing data
- Primary research skills (see also "Needs Assessment")

Grant Reporting:

Sociologists can help collect data on the efficacy and efficiency of programs funded by grants using their training in:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Using existing documentation as data
- Analysis of existing data
- Primary data collection (see also "Program Evaluation")
- Data Reporting
- Consulting on how to work needed data collection metrics into existing program activities (e.g. intake forms, attendance, etc.)

# Program Planning & Development

Nonprofits and human service agencies often develop and implement programs as a way to create social change or assist in the lives of the people and communities they serve. There is a need for these program to be evidence-based—meaning they are designed and developed based on evidence that such interventions will be successful. Developing evidence-based programs requires critical thought and investigation into a social problem and community before program development begins.

Sociologists are trained in theories of change and many also have specific expertise about certain populations, communities, or social problems that an organization might be working with. Sociologists can therefore help with:

- Understanding theories of change
- Systems-level thinking and theories

Sociologists also have research skills that can be used to assist in better understanding a social issue, types of interventions, population characteristics, organizational capacity, or other issues that can help to better develop programs. Some of these include:

- Literature Reviews
- Using existing documentation as data
- Demographic data collection
- GIS/ Community mapping

Nonprofit experience & expertise

Participant needs & preferences

Effective programs
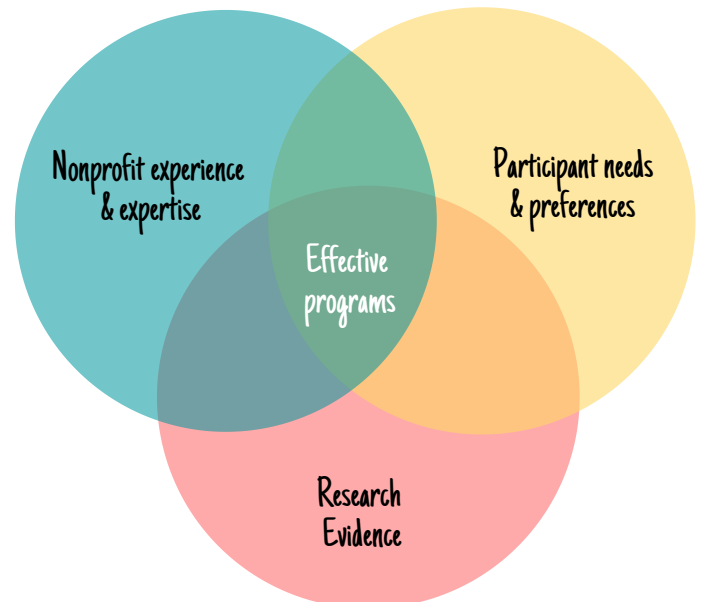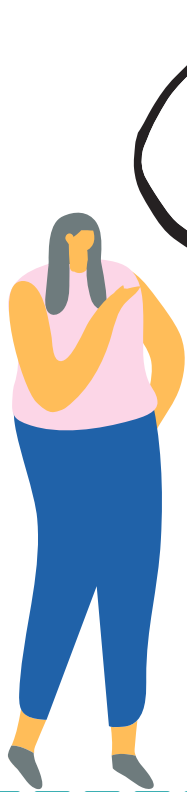
Research Evidence

> Sociological research skills are the foundation of evidence-based needs assessments.

Needs Assessment

Nonprofits benefit from research assessing the needs and existing assets that a community has. Needs assessments can happen on many levels—they might examine the needs of an entire community, a specific group of people, or participants of a specific program. The goal of a needs assessment is to allow organizations to develop goals and programs that will best address what members of a community want, need, can support, and will use. Needs assessments can be useful when nonprofits are developing their mission statements, as a first step to program development, and as a cyclical activity to ensure that, as community and individual needs change, the organization remains responsive in serving their target population and achieving their mission.

Some of these methods include:

Literature Reviews - Demographic data collection. - Surveys - Interviews
Focus Groups. - Photovoice - Using existing documentation as data
Analysis of existing data - Data Reporting - GIS/ Community mapping

Program Evaluation

Successful programs determine their short, medium, and long terms goals at the start of a program and measure if their program is meeting these goals along the way. Program evaluations might be as simple as collecting a few data points during a program session or recording basic data points such as program attendance, or they might require a full study.

If a program evaluation finds some areas for improvement, additional research may be required to determine what the community might benefit from or what has made other similar programs successful.

Here are some of the sociological research methods that can help with program evaluations:

Surveys - Interviews - Focus Groups - Photovoice - Using existing documentation as data
Analysis of existing data - Data Reporting - Consulting on how to work needed data collection metrics into existing program activities (e.g. intake forms, attendance, etc.)

Strategic planning and organizational improvement

Systems level thinking: Sociologists are trained to understand how individual experiences and broader social and institutional factors are related to one another. This systems level thinking allows sociologists to help nonprofits consider how their missions are tied to other political, social and environmental factors in their community.

Theoretical training: Some sociologists have specific training in the field of organizational sociology and have a deep understanding of micro and macro level organizational dynamics, allowing them to help organizations improve their structure and capacity.

Understanding diversity, equity and inclusion: Sociologists often have expertise in issues of inequalities and can help organizations promote diversity, equity and inclusion within their organizational structure and services.

Communicating with stakeholders

The ways that different organizations need to communicate with the public vary widely, and so the ways sociologists can help does too.

Sociologists can help nonprofits collect and interpret data that will have impact with stakeholders through:

- Background research
- Data collection
- Data reporting

Sociologists have the capacity to study the effectiveness of the ways that organizations are communicating. Some ways they can do this are through A/B testing and other forms of marketing research, which use standard primary social research methods.

Sociologists might also speak as experts in public forums, write blog posts, prepare reports to present to city council or government agencies, present number-heavy research in readable charts, graphs, maps or infographics, and much more.

Whether they have a bachelors, masters, or doctoral degree in sociology, all sociologists have training in: 1) developing a sociological imagination, 2) social theory, and 3) research methods. All of these can be used to enhance the capacity and work of nonprofit organizations!

Sociological imagination!

The sociological imagination allows sociologists to understand the connections between institutions, larger social systems, and individual experiences. Sociologists have an understanding of social problems that allows them to resist the urge to blame people for their problems, and motivates them to work on solving social problems.

Social theory!

All sociologists have knowledge and expertise in theories of social change and inequality. Sociologists may also have specific training in theories related to issues nonprofit organizations are working on.

Research Methods!

All sociologists have basic training in a breadth of research methods that can help nonprofits provide evidence-based services and improve organizational capacity.

Working together

There are many ways that sociologists can work with nonprofits! Here are just a few of them:

VOLUNTEERING: Professional sociologists may be able to build projects for nonprofits into their professional agenda, allowing them to complete projects or consult on a no-cost basis. Volunteering most easily occurs with smaller projects, but it still adds value to an organization's capacity.

CONSULTING: Sociologists with advanced degrees and/or experience in the nonprofit sector can serve nonprofits as consultants for large and small projects. These professional relationships allow nonprofits to bring experts onto their staff without the need to create a full-time position.

EMPLOYMENT: Sociological thinking, dedication to social justice, and training in critical thinking, inequality, and research methods, make a powerful combination that allow individuals with sociological training to serve nonprofit organizations as employees in a variety of capacities.