**NNIP Camp: Data Maturity**

May 19, 2021, 3-4 PM

Week 3

Participants:

* Erica Raleigh – D3 (moderator)
* Katie Pritchard – Data You Can Use
* Tommy Pearce – Neighborhood Nexus
* John Cruz – Rise
* Jake Cowan – Jake Cowan Consulting
* Jie Wu – Kinder Institute for Urban Research
* Robert Gradeck – University Center for Urban and Social Research at the University of Pittsburgh
* Ananya Hariharan – Urban Institute (notetaker)

Erica Raleigh: I started with a Google search and found data maturity models for the corporate sector, but not the nonprofit sector. So [I started building one](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1CzQeCtlBjIyVFuT6Q2VUhpOPSXRpW0eCkNb_fOHEa1k/edit?usp=sharing) and thought this would be an interesting Camp topic. Bob Braddock [sent over another one](https://www.dataorchard.org.uk/resources/data-maturity-framework) that includes an assessment tool. I’d like to hear about why you joined this breakout room. What’s interesting about this topic to you?

Katie Pritchard: I’m Katie Pritchard from Data You Can Use, and I am really interested in looking at that assessment tool because I’d like to make the case that we’re seeing some growth along the maturity curve in the use of data.

Tommy Pearce: I’m a former nonprofit strategic planning consultant, so I’ve thought a lot about nonprofit lifecycles but never really about data maturity. Combining those two things made a lot of sense for us. Nonprofits have a lot of different internal data needs. I’ve been thinking about gaps across nonprofits that no one is filling in.

John Cruz: I was approaching this from a similar lens as Tommy. How do we talk about data with partners beyond understanding what a data source is? What does it mean to have different life cycles of maturity, have different layers of understanding data beyond the way we often frame things?

Jake Cowan: From grant program work across 17 sites, the sites had a lot of variation in data maturity that impacted outcomes that we could expect from programs. It’s important to understand and be able to articulate that data maturity is in different places at different organizations.

Jie Wu: We work with different nonprofits in the community, and we try to assess their maturity – or data literacy, basically – and have had some interesting experiences. Some CDCs are really data driven and very data savvy. We can add value to their work, providing more data analytics to those teams. Some CDCs don’t have data management systems in their organizations. From the project manager perspective, I need to find who’s the best contact to help people understand data and what are the program or policy questions they’re trying to answer. It takes a longer time to get to that. I was not aware of the maturity model, so I’d like to learn more about that.

Erica: It was from a point of frustration in a recent project that made me think that there must be a better way to scope projects. We’ve been coming over budget for a few projects where we incorrectly estimated the project’s scope. Understanding data maturity helps us plug in and fill in gaps. Maybe it’s less about creating a typology for different organizations and more about how to work with differences in data maturity.

Jake: If you’re thinking about equitable data practices, where it comes to mind is that for an organization that’s fairly data mature, you can work with that organization to do some of their own work, whereas if you’re working with a group providing their own expertise, you’d have to provide more. It depends on how close you are as an NNIP partner to the person owning the data. The organizations you work with, and their data maturity, influences the capacity and you need to bring to the table as an NNIP partner.

Erica: Capacity evolution is interesting over time. What do you think in terms of – I don’t know if there’s a should here, but if local data intermediaries can assess potential nonprofits’ ability to partner, what does it mean to work with more mature organizations? Or should NNIP partners work more with less mature organizations to boost community capacity?

Tommy: It might just be having appropriate tools to work with different groups. We’re working on some data fluency organization work for the Georgia Department of Education. We’ll have to learn a lot about – different orgs will be at different levels. We’re also working on newer collective impacts initiatives. Our next hire is going to be someone good at communicating about data with a program evaluation background from the nonprofit sector. That’ll help us identify where other organizations are at.

Jie: We have a similar model. We have a program manager trained in public policy who is familiar with the evaluation framework. She’s not technically data savvy, but she’s a good communicator. She does a lot of triaging, getting background information to the team. Then the data analysts can sit down together and come up with a plan for organizations that helps the analysts gather information and provide data analytics services to clients. Also, we came up with a set of questions that we ask organizations seeking data support. That’s standard. One component of the questionnaire is more about the clients’ goals/questions they’re trying to solve. Usually program officers/chief executive directors will answer those. And other questions on the form are more about data – what kind you have, level of geography, data format. That questionnaire is completed by potential clients’ point of contact for internal data management. We worked on that form for two, three years, improving those questions, and we now feel like that’s a good set of questions to ask upfront to help me assess number of hours going to this engagement and also the client’s budget to come up with a reasonable solution.

Jake: Didn’t D3 have a tool kind of like that?

Erica: Yes, I was just thinking we have a strategy screen that kind of gets there. This is a set of questions we ask ourselves, like a decision tree, before we consider taking on a project with a partner. It covers everything from mission/vision value alignment to assessing whether we have resources to take this on. Just a set of reminder questions to ask ourselves. I wonder if data maturity goes in there. I like Tommy’s answer that you just work with a different set of tools, but when you have a small team, how can you be all things to all organizations? So in terms of the strategy screen, what would stop us from working with someone? Or instead of yes and no, it’s more “it’s this type of project” versus “this other type of project” that we’re scoping. And letting ourselves work with organizations at all maturity stages.

Tommy: One indicator we use to assess feasibility is if they can define what they want to do with the data and have a vision. That’s more like intuition, I guess, but it’s not a formal assessment. I like the idea of having a more formal one.

Erica: Jie, is that something you’d be willing to share, the set of questions?

Jie: Yeah, I’d be happy to share those. On the website, there’s someone you can contact for general questions and if you want research support, we’ll send a form to complete. It’s a screening process. Some organizations don’t want to complete all the questions. I like what you said. We first scan mission/vision alignment with ours and then we look into resources, capacity, budget. And then scope it in a different way if we decide to work with that organization. We’ll present different options. “You can do this, but this is the cost, or we can come up with this and use your own staff to do it.” We’ll show them the roadmap.

Katie: On this road to data maturity, how do you realistically assess where people are without insulting their understanding of things? We generally go in with the feeling that wherever they are is where they are and where I’ve seen some of the biggest disasters is when they have an inflated sense of where they are. They’ve had one measurement class and they think they’re an expert. I wonder if there’s a piece of this about respecting what they are really good at – generally the content of their work – and thinking about bringing those skills and expertise and encouraging their development and growth.

Erica: I’ve had so many people lately be so upfront and honest about where they are that the counter didn’t occur to me. That would be an interesting dance to do.

Jake: A partial answer is – the nonprofit world has all sorts of content needs, so even bringing something like these existing models and doing a quarterly webinar where you talk about who you are and what that model is, it doesn’t solve the one on one but it starts to socialize those ideas and creates a branding pitch for you all too. The more the ideas start to circulate.

Katie: One of the worst things we can do is create a greater data divide and by not appreciating where people are. We put people off and all the assumptions about useless data are reinforced if we’re not meeting people where they are. And that ability to translate data and compel people to appreciate it is a big piece of what needs to be done. So even the words like “maturity” – to assume I am immature in my data understanding doesn’t make me want to work with you.

Erica: I kept telling my team – we need a different name, but I can’t think of anything else to call it right now. We have to find a way to show these as being equally valid stages and also it’s not a linear progression. As a data intermediary, we’ve done better and worse with organizing our data and then we’ve gone back again. It happens. When I’m speaking to potential partners, it’s more like “oh, you’re in this place, we’ve seen this before, not a big deal, this is common, here are next steps you can take that will take you to a new phase in your evolution.” How do we take that information and learn from it and grow and improve? This is really the equity question I was asking earlier. If we hone in on one side or the other, is that advancing a more equitable distribution of information? How do we make sure we’re not leaving people behind?

Katie: It’s balancing that idea of democratizing data and advancing peoples’ ability to use it without what might be really judgmental or off-putting about the reality of the stage they’re in.

Erica: Alternative names?

Jake: We struggled with this. The best we came up with is confidence in data, and while I don’t think it lands, it’s better.

Erica: At least in our region, the word literacy is very triggering. I’ve tried to not use it. Confidence might be one.

Jie: We ask about how confident you are with handling data. Similar.

Katie: There’s literature on using “literacy in the age of data” instead of data literacy.

Jake: There’s a different way to think about capacity – what capacities do organizations expect of a data intermediary? That varies along with data confidence. But there might be an expectation for an organization to use data to reach a certain outcome.

Tommy: Expecting infinite data requests really bogs us down sometimes.

Jake: In my head, expectations of our capacity fits into this space of how the work is engaged, but also setting expectations for both sides.

Tommy: When a funder asks about what data we’re using – people don’t always know what we do. We don’t do evaluation or data sharing across program technology. I’ve had that conversation a lot in the last year, but also these are recurring themes of what people need so should we do more of that or should we find partners who can? There have been more collaborations coming out of last 18 months than in a while.

Jake: Does digging into the space open any different funding streams? At least in Chicago, there’s a very different set of funders for us and nonprofits.

Tommy: The network for program evaluation is very decentralized. There are contractors who work at the CDC full time, but not a lot of program evaluation firms or data shops. You either have them internally or you find a contractor.

Jie: Has anyone run into this scenario? A nonprofit consultant contacts you and asks you to do some work for them. They just need data and that’s it. I don’t know how you deal with those situations. We make it clear that we only work directly with nonprofits, so if it’s a request coming from a nonprofit, we can provide up to two hours of service for free. The consultants are taking advantage of that two hours.

Jake: New Orleans had the gold standard of this for a while. One thing this forum does is that it forces people to specify what they want. It even used to say something like “we can do a one- or two-hour thing, we can prioritize media, and we don’t work with private businesses or consultants.”

Katie: We have a funder who supports us to do up to two hours of data requests. And then over two hours it’s all negotiable. It’s generally the funder’s grantees and we do it for the city, as well. For CDBG agencies, the city will pay us to do up to two hours. So people are careful about what they ask. It’s not expected to be an ongoing engagement. Sometimes it can be done in 15 minutes. And we track these and get a good sense of what people are asking for. That’s one way to make a dent in that.

Jie: We have an intake form. That’s how I find out that a requestor is an independent consultant working with a nonprofit we’re familiar with. The nonprofit asked consultant to get the data from us.

Tommy: I don’t mind working with consultants, especially when they write us into their proposals. They could also generate more leads for work for us later on because they have so many clients.

Jake: I used to experience this at LISC all the time. When we knew something was coming that was fine, but there were definitely some extractive requests that came in where a consultant thought they could get some free work. Would it be useful to resurface this in the network in some way? Have a broader session on it? Throw the links in the NNIP group?

Erica: I had no idea anyone else had developed a screening framework at all, so I’d be interested in a call out for people to share their process. We’ve shared our own strategies a few times with others. It’d be nice to collect some of that, even if it’s just through the Google Group. And when we relaunched our website, we did a thorough investigation of how people were intaking data requests. We kept our online form simple to lower barrier to entry, but others have more restrictions. Taking on project work versus taking on data requests.

Katie: Connecting those two things – what is that screening process and how does that help you assess where people are on the scale. “What stage are they at” process/matrix would be helpful.

Tommy: We always give people a piece of data if they ask for it, so if we don’t have a full conversation, sometimes one request turns into another. If we have that conversation at the outset, we could make engagements go faster.

Erica: Most of our analysts usually ask questions before blindly sending data. Sometimes people don’t know what exactly they’re trying to ask.

Katie: I feel like that’s true most times.

Jie: I sent the form with Jake and Erica. Feel free to share with others.