



Using Research to Measure Impact: How to Evaluate Your Programs

Examine and grow the impact of your organization using data.



Using Research to Measure Impact: How to Evaluate Your Programs

Here's what we know:

You have a *feeling* your program is working. Maybe you've even heard from others that it's working. People using your program or engaged in your community keep showing up, keep affirming your work, keep remarking how important and impactful your organization is. But anecdotes alone aren't evidence. You know you need more data—and you know you need something more sophisticated than a gut feeling to help you track success. Or maybe you have *some* of the data—some baseline intake evaluations used for new clients—but you're not sure what to do with it.

Wherever you're at, you know a good plan for evaluation is key for measuring impact. And measuring impact can help you tell your organization's success story better to attract new participants, new donors, or simply to see where you started, where you're headed, and what areas you need to grow in.

Springtide can help. We've already helped of mission-driven organizations make plans for program evaluation so they can measure impact and grow their reach. We know what steps you need to take **before**, **during**, and **after** your program launches to make sure evaluation is easy and effective.

- 1 BEFORE: Learn Objective Mapping**
- 2 DURING: Get Started ASAP**
- 3 AFTER: Evaluate for Community Impact**

A Case Study in Program Evaluation

Let's start with a story.

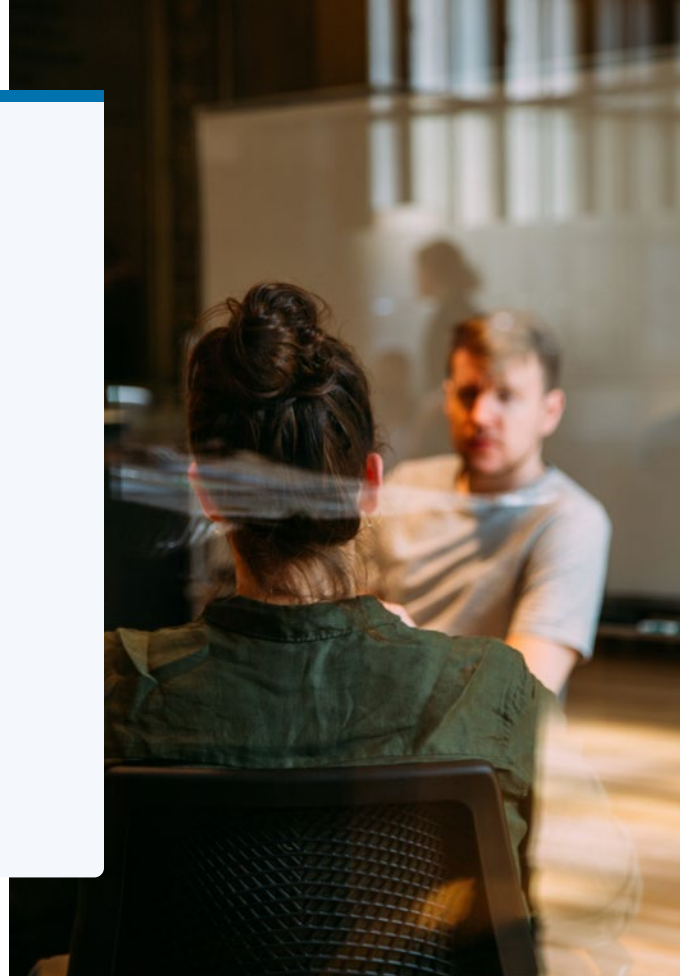
Our client, let's call him Alex, had only recently joined his organization when he reached out to Springtide for help with program evaluation. This organization had recently launched an exciting new program, but it was a significant departure from their standard offerings. When Alex joined the team, his boss told him that she was certain this new program would make a huge impact, both in terms of reaching new audiences and developing broader donor support and funding opportunities. Despite being sure of this program's value, this manager hadn't designed a way to actually measure it. She gave *that* responsibility to Alex as soon as he was on board.

Look for some of these key challenges this organization faced when it came to program evaluation, and see whether you recognize them in your own work:

- The organization knows they need to set up the findings to show the important work that they are doing, but they don't know how.

A Case Study in Program Evaluation *(continued)*

- The original staff does not have the time or expertise to begin this key data collection.
- Alex, the person tasked with evaluating and sharing the impact of this new program was *not* part of the team that designed and launched it, so he has no way of knowing what was decided in the beginning and why.
- No data was collected before the launch or in the first few weeks of the program.
- Even if the organization had collected data, the team didn't have the skills or knowledge to figure out what to do with it to demonstrate impact.



STEP 1: BEFORE



Learn Objective Mapping

Our client had some idea about the types of things they would need to know. Namely, how often people were attending, who was attending, what drew them in, and why they came back. He also knew that there were questions he didn't even know to ask. There was no systematic way in place to collect data, and he needed help organizing his thoughts about what he should be collecting that would help the organization measure the impact their program was having. He also wished that he had a way to understand that value of the data they already had access to—the basics about who was attending, returning, and why. But that data wasn't "hard" data; it was based on impression.



The Springtide Insight: Objective Mapping

Setting up a good evaluation plan starts with one essential but often overlooked step: *Objective Mapping*. We have developed an Objective Mapping process at Springtide that is critical to the success of all of our projects. In the most basic sense, Objective Mapping is a spreadsheet. The secret, however, is what, how, and why you build this spreadsheet.

STEP 1: BEFORE (continued)



Across the top, in the column headers, we list our client's primary objectives. This is an opportunity to really reflect and think hard about goals. What are you really trying to accomplish with the program you're running? What do you want to learn? How will this project inform the way your organization operates now and into the future?

In each row, we fill in every data collection method and exact type of question, and ideal source for the information that would best help us measure that objective. Once those two big pieces are in place, it's a simple matter of putting an X in every cell where a question intersects with a particular objective.



Click here to see an example of Objective Mapping based on the case study at the beginning of this white paper.

Now, step back and notice where there aren't Xs—any column without a mark means it'll be difficult to measure the objective. If there are any rows without an X, it means you're wasting your time collecting data that doesn't relate to your objectives. This is how Objective Mapping works in the most basic sense. That's the simple version. But with a little imagination, Objective Mapping can become more complex and infinitely more powerful. In the past, we've built in scales for weighting certain objectives higher than others, noting which measures show up in which products (newsletters, internal reports, etc.), and added ways to assess the magnitude of impact in key areas.

Objective Mapping serves as the guide to keep your evaluation efforts headed in the right direction. If you take the time to build your map well, it can keep you and your team from becoming overly focused on data point, pursuing data or strategies that don't relate to your core objectives, or, perhaps worst of all, implementing a measurement plan just to satisfy one funder. As long as you stick to collecting data that has a place on the map, you'll be able to make strategic decisions, adjust without losing focus, and innovate within your program's mission in important ways.





Get Started ASAP

Alex, our client looking to build an evaluation strategy at his new organization, knew from previous experiences that he would need at least some hard numbers and testimonials to ensure this new program appealed to future donors and funders. But when he joined the organization, he learned they had not collected any data at all specific to this program. He worried that he had inherited a project doomed to fail since they missed the opportunity to ask some questions early on and get some baseline data. Understandably, Alex was feeling really overwhelmed.

When Springtide came on board, we helped survey what the organization already had in terms of raw data, whether it was related specifically to this new program or not. With our help, Alex was able to see that they did have some information to get started, and we came up with creative ways to build on it. Alex began writing down everything he knew about current and past participants in an effort to start somewhere. He found someone on staff that could help with tracking, since he couldn't take on the task himself, but he soon realized they would need a larger effort from more people to achieve what they wanted. They could now plan for hiring, contracting, etc.—all because they had more information about what the process would entail.

The Springtide Insight: Get Started ASAP



In one of our earlier white papers in this series, “Research Gets You Funding,” we covered some of the primary reasons why evaluation and impact assessments are critical for your organization. The hard data—both quantitative and qualitative—are necessary to help you secure and retain funding.

But there are other challenges beyond simply documenting your outputs and outcomes. How do you begin to assess the actual impacts of what your organization is doing? Are you having a transformative effect on the people you serve or the community where you work? There's a basic rule when it comes to measuring the impact of an already established program: Get Started ASAP.

If your program is already up and running, the most important thing you can do is **start collecting data ASAP in a systematic, intentional way**. Even if you have to adjust course down the line as you get a better sense of what you want to measure, starting *as soon as possible* will give you at least some initial results to guide your efforts and might well end up forming the basis of a full impact analysis. Asking questions right away, even if they're not *exactly* the right questions, is the best way by far to *get* to the right questions.



Here are some simple ways to get started assessing the impact of an already established program:

- 1 Do some digging.** Determine what outcomes you hope your program has for participants (e.g., increased self-efficacy, lower dropout rates, greater organizational innovation, etc.). Then, do a quick web search to see how others have measured those things, adopt their measurement methods, and begin asking participants to fill out simple surveys upon program completion. You don't need to become experts in all the ways to collect data on some basic demographic questions. You can compare your results to the national averages on almost anything with just a little bit of digging.
- 2 Interview past participants.** Qualitative data is critical for telling powerful impact stories. Track down the people you've engaged with over the years, and ask them to talk to you for 15 minutes about how the program impacted their lives.
- 3 Hear from others.** Talk to local or national leaders in government, education, business, and other sectors, and ask them about the value of your outcomes in their worlds. For example, if your program focuses on building confidence and social skills among youth with low cultural capital, then ask local business leaders how much it matters to them to have employees who can interact confidently and professionally with customers. These responses help *define* your impact.

These three simple things will help build a foundation upon which you can build an overall case for your program's impact. As your evaluation efforts expand and become more sophisticated, you'll be able to keep many of these same data collection initiatives as part of your overall strategy.





Evaluate for Community Impact

The client in this ongoing case study knew he needed help figuring out where to start the process of program evaluation for this program at his new organization. Springtide helped him map his objectives and create a process for future data collection; connect with current, past, and future participants, which yielded tremendously helpful data; and ultimately focus his attention on building a program evaluation that could demonstrate community impact.

Alex had a general idea about the type of impact the organization *hoped* to have but (understandably!) didn't know there was other research already in the field that could help him think through how to collect data or measure success. On top of that, he didn't have a sense of how to talk about or demonstrate the importance of this program within the wider community. After he and his team started data collecting from people who were involved in their program in the past or were participating currently, they began to open doors to share this initial feedback, in the context of the organization's overall mission, with the wider community. They started to get feedback and responses in return, which opened a dialogue Alex didn't know they needed.



The Springtide Insight: Stand on the Shoulders of Giants

It's important that evaluators understand and can document the impact their program is having on their local community. But how can you even begin to assess your impact in a way that is both cost effective and accurate? secret: *Stand on the shoulders of giants*. This expression originates from the twelfth century but can have dramatic consequences for your organization.

Let's say, for example, that when you completed your [Objective Mapping exercise](#), you identified reducing high school dropouts as one of the major objectives of your program. You might not have the resources to do a comprehensive economic analysis of your local community to find out what each additional graduate means to the local economy, but you don't have to. Take a look at [The Graduation Effect website](#), which allows you to input your state and metro area to see what the impact would be of increasing graduation rates.



STEP 3: AFTER (continued)

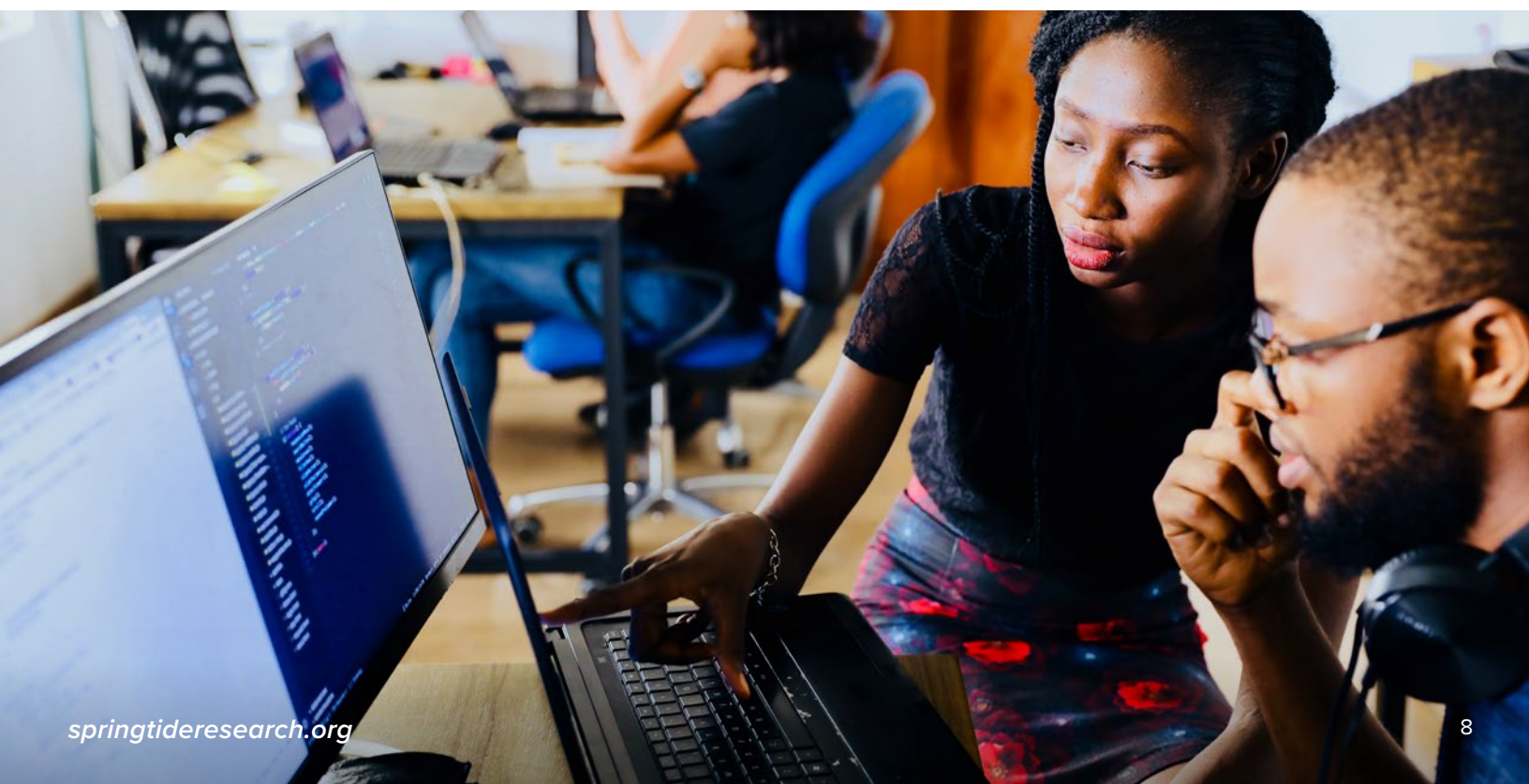


If you can utilize readily available resources like this, then it's just a short jump to be able to show the local impact of your program if you can successfully claim that you help to keep kids in school and working toward graduation.

Many resources like this are accessible through a simple web search (I found *The Graduation Effect* in about 10 minutes for a previous client project). Others, though, might require some skill and access in reading scientific journals. Thankfully, there are often journals aimed at the general public for just this purpose. In sociology, for example, *Contexts* is a great publication that allows non-specialists to understand the latest sociological findings easily. Other fields have their own similar outlets.

We do this same kind of thing to help inform our own work at Springtide. For example, we put together information from several

sources to show the harmful impact of severe isolation and loneliness on mental, physical, and spiritual health for our report *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation*. When we combined the impact that others had already been tracking with our own new data, we had an immediate and clear call to action to get young people connected to trusted adults. If you can utilize the work that others with more resources have done putting your new data in conversation with that previous work, you can make the case for your program's impact with more credibility, faster, and with less money. Standing on the shoulders of giants is all about putting your own work in conversation with other research, and relying on those who have gone before you in your industry to help add richness and additional context to the research you're undertaking.



Conclusion

Our client was tasked with setting up an evaluation process for a new program that his organization was sure would be impactful for their audience and donors.

BEFORE

Set aside time for Objective Mapping and reflect on the particular goals you want to measure with data and evaluation.

DURING

Just get started! Find out what information you have at your disposal and how you can use it. The sooner you dive in, the quicker you can figure out what else you need.

AFTER

Start thinking about the larger conversation you're in, and design your program evaluation so you can be in dialogue with others in your industry and show your unique impact.

Working with Springtide, Alex's organization began to build a process for figuring out what data they already had, reflecting on the main goals they wanted to track, and showing their impact in the wider community. Alex and his team were able to demonstrate that they have a vested interest in their audience; they gathered information that can be used to develop a strategic plan and made a plan for research follow-up to keep a pulse on their membership over time. Moreover, they were able to speak more credibly about the things their membership cares about and develop a data collection tool that can be used on their own or handed off to a research partner easily and with less expense. This kind of process for collecting data and building program evaluation for one part of the company ultimately helped the whole organization use the new information to keep moving forward and expanding.



You can easily implement these same tactics in your own organization. If you need any help doing so, don't hesitate to be in touch. You can email Megan Bissell, Head of Research for Springtide Research Institute: megan@springtideresearch.org

Custom research for mission-driven organizations.

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Springtide offers custom research to help you learn more so you can do more.

Our research services include program evaluation, grant support, custom surveys and data collection, and more. In addition, Dr. Josh Packard is available for presentations on Springtide data or the custom research you commission.

Contact Megan at research@springtideresearch.org for more information. If you haven't already signed up to receive the other three white papers directly to your inbox, visit springtideresearch.org/custom-research to sign up.



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