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UNDERSTANDING DIMENSIONS OF ADOCACY SUCCESS: HOW EVALUATION CAN MAXIMIZE THE IMPRACT OF NONPROFIT ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Emerging trends in nonprofit organizations include advocacy and evaluation. Usually these two activities are seen as mutually exclusive. In this paper, the author examines how these two activities are related: how evaluating advocacy can be important to unlocking the legitimacy of advocacy initiatives. It includes a review of the role of advocacy as a critical strategy for nonprofit mission advancement and how, despite its importance, nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy at consistently low rates and are typically not supported in advocacy by the philanthropic sector. The author reviews the literature to demonstrate the relationship between evaluation and heightened organizational effectiveness and presents a framework for evaluating advocacy through which nonprofits can demonstrate the progress and success of advocacy initiatives advance organizational learning, and legitimize advocacy as a strategy for mission advancement amongst nonprofits organizations and their supporters.

INTRODUCTION

Two emerging practices in the nonprofit sector—program evaluation and nonprofit advocacy—have seemingly very little to do with one another, but this paper will explore the relationship between the two critical practices and explain why effective evaluation of advocacy initiatives, based on key dimensions of advocacy success, is crucial to success in nonprofits’ efforts to create social change at the systems level. Currently, nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy at consistently low rates (Berry & Arons, 2003). While there are a number of reasons why nonprofit organizations choose not to or are unable to engage in advocacy, the common theme is that advocacy practices generally lack legitimacy as a role for 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations and their funders. In addition to providing a framework of evaluative indicators of advocacy success, this paper asserts that evaluation is the key that will help to alleviate perceived risks for private funders to support nonprofit advocacy initiatives, allow nonprofit organizations to demonstrate short-term outcomes and long-term impacts of their advocacy work, and will legitimize advocacy as a key role

for nonprofit organizations in the eyes of funders, government, the public, and nonprofit leaders themselves.

The Social Purpose of Nonprofit Advocacy

Although advocacy is not yet a pervasive practice throughout the nonprofit sector, nor do most nonprofit organizations perceive advocacy to be a part of their mission or purpose (Berry & Arons, 2003), there are compelling reasons for nonprofit organizations to not only engage in advocacy, but to prioritize advocacy as a strategy for mission advancement. The most basic of these reasons is the unique ability of nonprofit organizations to advocate for traditionally underrepresented populations in the democratic process (Reid, 2006). Additionally, the nonprofit sector as a whole is capable of representing nearly every facet of the American population. According to Reid (2006), “[Nonprofits] promote the interests, values, and preferences of a diverse civic culture that includes the mainstream and minority, social service providers and their clients, businesses and employees, and the religious and the secular” (p. 343).

Another reason for nonprofit organizations to engage in advocacy is to promote a complementary relationship with government. Because of term limits in the legislative branch of government, it is necessary for lawmakers to be generalists—to have a high-level understanding of nearly every issue facing the American public at any given time. Because of this demand, most lawmakers lack an in-depth understanding of the issues on which nonprofit organizations are experts. Advocacy allows nonprofit organizations to provide elected officials with expertise on issues relevant to their mission (Skene-Pratt, 2013).

Perhaps the most common reason that nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy, given the current state of the nonprofit sector, is to protect the government resources that are crucial to achieving their mission (Berry & Arons, 2003; Skene-Pratt, 2013). Skene-Pratt (2013), describes the critical nature of advocacy to protect an organization’s resources: “Policymakers support nonprofits through tax incentives for charitable giving, grants and contracts, in-kind support, tax exemptions, and special provisions. Every day, legislation is passed or policies are adopted that directly impact the people that you serve or the resources that you protect” (p. 7).

Finally, and most importantly, advocacy can (and should) be viewed by nonprofit organizations as an ethical imperative—a means of fulfilling their basic societal purpose, which is to create public value. Ultimately, the goal of any nonprofit organization should be to eliminate

the need for their services altogether. Advocacy allows nonprofit organizations to address the societal systems and contexts that necessitate their existence in the first place. While the provision of direct services is undoubtedly important, advocacy should be embraced as a complementary—and indispensable—strategy in advancing any organization’s mission.

Background—Nonprofit Advocacy

The initial priority of most literature on the subject of nonprofit advocacy is to clarify what constitutes advocacy in the first place. The terms “advocacy” and “lobbying” are often used interchangeably, but there is an important distinction between the two for nonprofit organizations. Advocacy is a concept that encompasses lobbying, but advocacy *apart* from lobbying is not regulated by the IRS for 501c3 nonprofit organizations. According to Skene-Pratt (2013), “Advocacy is simply identifying, embracing, and promoting a cause” (p. 6). Libby (2012) distinguishes public advocacy from individual advocacy (which often takes place in the context of case management), describing public advocacy as attempting to influence public opinion or policy. Lobbying, on the other hand, has a much more specific definition and lobbying activity by 501c3 organizations is regulated by the IRS. Libby (2012) provides this definition of lobbying:

According to the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest...lobbying is “a specific, legally defined activity that involves stating your position on specific legislation to legislators and/or asking them to support your position”...It does not matter if you or your allies are advocating in favor of or against a particular piece of legislation; you are lobbying when you make a direct appeal to an elected official to do something specific about a law or a proposed law. (Ch. 1, para. 39)

One of the perceived barriers for nonprofit organizations to engage in advocacy is understanding the laws that regulate nonprofit lobbying activity. While these regulations needn’t preclude nonprofit participation in government, the complexity of the regulations acts as a barrier to entry for many organizations. Nonprofit organizations are legally permitted to engage in lobbying activity, but any activity classified as lobbying must be tracked and reported on the organization’s 990 and is subject to expenditure limits. For example, an organization that spends time building relationships with their legislative representatives and educating these representatives on issue areas that affect their mission may do so freely and without regard for the time or dollars invested in these relationships. The organization may

even discuss specific legislation with their representatives without limits, provided they do not ask a representative to adopt a legislative position. However, if the organization asks their representative to take a certain position on a specific piece of legislation, this is considered lobbying and the expenses associated with that activity (even if administrative time is the only expense) must be reported. An organization's collective lobbying expenses are subject to IRS limits in order to maintain 501c3 status.

501c3 organizations are subject to one of two sets of rules limiting their lobbying activity. The default regulation for nonprofit organizations is called the "substantial part test," which stipulates that lobbying should not constitute a substantial part of a nonprofit's work or expenditures (Libby, 2012). The second set of rules—which requires organizations to "opt-in" to this regulation by submitting a form to the IRS—is known as either the expenditure test or the 501(h) election. The expenditure test provides a sliding scale to determine allowable lobbying expenses based on an organization's total operating budget (Libby, 2012).

Adding to the potential confusion of these regulations is that foundations, which are also 501c3 organizations, are subject to a different set of rules than other nonprofit organizations (Libby, 2012; Skene-Pratt, 2013). Community foundations are permitted to lobby under the same set of rules as other nonprofit organizations. Private foundations, on the other hand, are not permitted to lobby, nor are they permitted to earmark grants to nonprofit organizations for lobbying purposes. Grants made by private foundations to nonprofit organizations for general operating purposes, however, can be used for lobbying. Exceptions to these regulations for both nonprofit organizations and foundations—that is, activities that cannot be classified as lobbying—include "influencing regulations, discussion of broad, social, economic issues, nonpartisan research, and self-defense lobbying" (Libby, 2012, p. 24). A lack of understanding of these nuanced regulations on the part of both nonprofit organizations and private foundations often results in nonprofits avoiding the use of foundation grant dollars for lobbying expenses altogether (Libby, 2012).

Background—Program Evaluation

According to Festen and Philbin (2007), "At its most basic, evaluation involves looking at your program during a specific period of time and asking, 'Is what we're doing working? How do we know it's working?' and often, 'Under what conditions does it work best?'" (p. 5). It is important to make the distinction between what program evaluation is and what it is commonly perceived to be—that is, program evaluation

should be understood as a tool for planning and learning, not a test that can be passed or failed (Festen and Philbin, 2007). This distinction is a critical one for service-based nonprofit organizations to make, because under the latter assumption—that evaluation is a tool to assess the success or failure of work that has already been completed—it is difficult for organizations with already limited resources to make the case for “backtracking over territory that’s already been covered and work that’s already been done, with the hope of reconstructing what actually happened, and then determining whether it was worth the effort” (Festen and Philbin, 2007, p. 5).

When viewed through the former lens, however—an understanding that evaluation is a ultimately a tool for social betterment by way of effective planning and organizational learning—one can easily make the case that evaluation should be a part of all that a nonprofit does. Evaluation, in this case, becomes crucial to mission fulfillment. Festen and Philbin (2007) emphasize, “It is important to understand evaluation as part of your organization’s real work—as a thread running through all that you do to achieve your mission, plan your program, and raise money. Rather than seeing it as a burden, recognize its enormous value” (p. 4).

Evaluation Uses. When conducted effectively and *used* effectively throughout an organization’s operations, evaluation can make an organization more successful at everything it does. Internally, organizations should use the answers to their evaluative questions to inform their strategic planning, measure progress, identify areas for improvement, set goals, make decisions, plan programs, allocate resources, motivate staff, generate support, and be accountable to the mission. Externally, that same information should be used to report to funders, constituents, and the community, and to use this accountability to make the case for additional resources and support. Finally, throughout the entire process, organization leaders must maintain a mindset of organizational learning, using evaluative results to consistently improve operations (Festen and Philbin, 2007).

Outcomes Measurement. Another critical consideration for effective program evaluation is to evaluate programmatic outcomes in addition to outputs. The outcomes measurement model of nonprofit program evaluation differs from the traditional program evaluation model in that it measures program results involving changes in participants’ “behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes,” rather than “the direct products of the program activities [which] are usually measured in terms of the volume of work accomplished” (Fischer, 2001, p. 563). The outcomes measurement approach begins with the development of a logic model that outlines the elements of a program,

the necessary program inputs, strategies, and outputs, and long-term goals that ultimately serve as benchmarks for measuring program outcomes (Fischer, 2001).

While outcomes measurement is an effective strategy for organizational learning and growth, it is not a perfect system. Organizations may struggle to employ outcomes measurement as an evaluation method given its inherent costs (typically 5-15% of total program expenses), especially if evaluation is not embraced and funded by grantmakers. Organizations that do have the level of funding and expertise necessary to conduct outcomes measurement may be subject to the creaming effect (changing the type of clients served in order to improve program outcomes) or selective reporting (focusing only on specific subgroups of the population served to create the appearance of better outcomes)—both of which dramatically reduce the value of outcomes measurement as a learning tool for long-term change (Fischer, 2001).

Connection Between Evaluation and Organizational Effectiveness. When employed and leveraged properly, program evaluation is an important ingredient for overall organizational effectiveness. Festen and Philbin (2007) define an effective organization as one that, “fulfills its mission, communicates its vision and mission, plans for the future, achieves and measures results, manages an active and informed governance structure, secures resources appropriate to needs, and engages and serves its community” (p. 30). Evaluation empowers nonprofit organizations to reach this level of organizational effectiveness by providing crucial information to improve every facet of the organization, including contributing to long-term strategic planning, short-term planning for programs, high-level problem solving, and demonstrating accomplishments to stakeholders (Festen and Philbin, 2007).

Advocacy and Organizational Effectiveness

In addition to the direct benefits of advocacy—such as procuring a new source of government funding, introducing a new ballot measure, or changing administrative policy—researchers have found advocacy work to contribute to organizational effectiveness in a number of significant ways. In the evaluation background section, one definition of organizational effectiveness was presented. In presenting their findings about high-impact nonprofits Crutchfield and Grant (2008) explain an alternate perspective,

Being an extraordinary nonprofit isn't about building an organization and scaling it up. It's not about perfect management or outstanding marketing or having a large budget. Rather, it's

about finding ways to leverage other sectors to create extraordinary impact. Great nonprofits are catalysts; they transform the system around them to achieve greater good (p. 207).

Ultimately, advocacy is a key strategy for nonprofit organizations to address the root-cause of social problems, catalyze change, and advance their mission. Through engaging their extensive networks, generating systems change, and scaling their impact, nonprofits are able to leverage their advocacy efforts to embody Crutchfield and Grant's (2008) idea of great nonprofits—transforming the systems around them to achieve greater good.

Nonprofit Advocacy and Systems. The concept of systems change refers to a problem-solving approach that addresses each facet or layer of a systemic problem. The systems change approach is distinctly different from the traditional nonprofit service delivery model, which relies on isolated, rather than collective, solutions to complex problems. Kania and Kramer (2011) explain, The problem with relying on the isolated impact of individual organizations is further compounded by the isolation of the nonprofit sector. Social problems arise from the interplay of governmental and commercial activities, not only from the behavior of social sector organizations. As a result, complex problems can be solved only by cross-sector coalitions that engage those outside the nonprofit sector (p. 5). Nonprofit advocacy is a critical strategy for promoting the cross-sector collaboration necessary to address the causes of systemic problems, rather than just alleviating their symptoms. In addition to collaborating across sectors, collaboration within nonprofit networks allows for the development of appropriately complex solutions to multi-faceted social problems.

Easterling (2012) defines a network as “a set of relationships among a group of ‘members’—individuals or organizations. Members use those relationships to achieve their individual and collective goals” (p. 59). Nonprofit and social networks are responsible for significant societal advances, including the passage of civil rights legislation (Easterling, 2012). For better or worse, networks shape society and all of the policies and structures that make up our current social context. Apart from a strong network, an individual or a single organization has little chance of effecting change on a broad scale.

Participation in a network or several networks is a natural solution for nonprofit organizations, allowing them to share resources and expertise and to allocate the responsibilities associated with achieving a common goal. As Easterling (2012) describes, “For good reason, nonprofits typically focus on a specific group of clients...or a particular area of impact. By

bringing together multiple nonprofits with compatible interests and complementary resources, a network allows for a much wider scope of influence” (p. 60).

Yet despite the potential for nonprofit networks to achieve lasting systems change—and despite the fact that doing so could bring network members significantly closer to achieving their mission—most nonprofits use networks to maintain the status quo rather than taking on an activist role (Easterling, 2012). Easterling (2012) suggests that the shortage of nonprofit networks working to address the root causes of myriad social problems may be due to a lack of capacity, coordination, or support. I would suggest that another reason nonprofit networks do not typically engage in social activism is the inherent risk involved with such an undertaking, due to a deficiency of documented and evaluated precedents. This issue is powerfully linked to the measurement of program outcomes and organizational effectiveness—if nonprofits were able to meaningfully evaluate the effectiveness of the networks to which they belong and the outcomes of network efforts to catalyze social change, it would be a great deal easier to garner support from and funders and board members. Additionally, documented success of network efforts to catalyze systems change would legitimize this sort of work as a meaningful strategy to achieve organizational missions.

Scaling Impact Through Advocacy. Traditionally, leaders in the nonprofit sector have sought to expand the scope of their social impact by expanding organizations—in terms of human resources, dollars, and physical locations. With demand for resources at an all-time high, however, nonprofits have attempted to instead expand the scope of their social impact without a significant expansion in the size of their organization. The term *scaling impact* refers to this effort to strategically employ existing resources to enable nonprofit organizations to address some of society’s most significant problems (Bradach, 2010).

One could also think of the concept of scaling impact as a kind of social leverage. Crutchfield and Grant (2008) explain:

In physics, leverage is defined as the mechanical advantage gained from using a lever. In the social sciences, it translates into the ability to influence people, events, and decisions. In business, it means using a proportionately small investment to gain a high return. Whatever the definition, we think the concept of leverage captures exactly what great nonprofits do. Like a man lifting a boulder three times his weight with a lever and fulcrum, they have far more impact than their mere size or structure would suggest (pp. 19-20).

Based on these concepts, nonprofit scholars have begun to reframe their thinking about what constitutes an impactful nonprofit organization, realizing that the organizations that achieve the most significant impact may not be the largest organizations, nor even the best managed. Instead, researchers have found that organizations that shift their focus externally—toward engaging each sector of society to address the root causes of systemic problems—are the organizations best able to achieve sustainable solutions to large-scale social problems (Crutchfield and Grant, 2008).

One of the most effective strategies that nonprofits can employ to significantly scale their social impact is to blend political advocacy with strong programs and services. The most impactful nonprofits recognize that engaging in advocacy is crucial to fulfilling their mission and that the level of change necessary to address the root causes of systemic social problems is not possible without engaging government as part of the solution (Crutchfield and Grant, 2008; Bradach, 2010).

While traditional wisdom suggests that engaging in advocacy could result in mission creep for service-oriented nonprofits, the exact opposite could be argued—that engaging in advocacy actually ensures that organizations are focused more on advancing their *mission* than advancing their *organization*. Crutchfield and Grant (2008) describe the *social entrepreneur's trap*: “This is when a nonprofit seeks to improve or expand its own programs at the expense of not leveraging the organization’s expertise and other capabilities for field-building, policy-making and broader social change” (p. 46). Nonprofits that fall into this trap generally seek to advance their cause through organizational growth, despite the fact that organizational growth alone is generally insufficient to achieve large-scale change.

This is not to imply, however, that nonprofit programs are negligible relative to policy work. In fact, organizations that effectively blend both service provision and advocacy, rather than focusing on just one or the other, increase the scale of their impact most dramatically. This is likely due to the phenomenon that Crutchfield and Grant (2008) call a “virtuous cycle.” In this cycle, organizations engage in direct service in order to address immediate social needs. As nonprofits develop effective programs and engage with clients first-hand, they gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the social problems they seek to address, which helps them to more effectively develop and advocate for policy solutions. As the cycle continues with nonprofits engaging in advocacy, they are able to play a part in creating innovative strategies to address social problems that can then be implemented through their programs. Additionally, engaging in advocacy can often help organizations build important relationships and

gain access to new sources of funding to support their services. In short, “when their policy is informed by direct service and their programs are informed by policy work, these organizations are more effective at both” (Crutchfield and Grant, 2008, p. 34).

Barriers to Engaging in Advocacy

Despite the understanding on the part of researchers and industry leaders about the impact potential of blending advocacy with service to advance nonprofit missions, nonprofits that put this understanding into practice—and the foundations that fund them—are still in the minority (Crutchfield and Grant, 2008; Rangelhi, 2012). This is likely due in large part to the organizational obstacles that can prevent nonprofits with a dominant service orientation from taking the leap to engage in advocacy. Organizations must consider risks such as whether they will alienate funders or volunteers, how they will balance the demands of an advocacy initiative with their existing program portfolio, and how they will be able to demonstrate success to funders and other stakeholders (Berry and Aarons, 2003; Crutchfield and Grant, 2008).

One of the most common barriers to advocacy activity is a lack of financial resources at a level high enough to achieve significant impact (Libby, 2012)—though it can be argued that this is simply a perceived barrier, rather than an actual one. Hessenius (2007), argues that avoiding advocacy due to limited resources is a matter of priority and culture for most organizations: For too long, nonprofits have refused to enter the political fray, as they lack either the wherewithal or the motivation to operate on the political stage—to consciously and strategically manipulate the media, move the public, and raise and disburse, within the political matrix, the level of funds necessary to compete with other interest groups plying the system (p. 17).

For some organizations, not engaging in advocacy may not be due to a simple lack of resources, but rather the nature of those resources and their associated limitations. It was mentioned earlier in this paper, for example, that private foundations are prohibited from earmarking grants for lobbying purposes. Additionally, government funds are generally prohibited from being used for lobbying. A misunderstanding on the part of nonprofits further exacerbates this problem, as many organizations mistakenly believe that the receipt of any government funding prohibits them from engaging in lobbying at all (Libby, 2012).

Aside from a consideration of financial resources, it is common for nonprofit organizations to lack the general organizational capacity to

advocate effectively. Reid (2006) explains, “Given the political challenges advocates face in promoting their causes, it is not surprising that many nonprofits, especially small charitable organizations, opt out of politics altogether” (p. 352). Hessenius (2007) elaborates on these organizational challenges: “Most nonprofit leadership is understaffed, overworked, and underpaid. They lack the time, the skill sets, the networking options, and certainly the funds to even participate in a larger interest-group advocacy effort, or at least that is how they perceive their circumstances” (p. 17).

Each of these challenges seems to be symptomatic of a larger, overarching problem, which is that advocacy is generally considered to be beyond the scope of responsibility and purpose for the nonprofit sector (Hessenius, 2007). As a result, the majority of nonprofit organizations lack the understanding, the wherewithal, and the resolution to engage in effective advocacy, which has led to a veritable deficiency of information about advocacy as a strategic practice and an overall lack of capacity for significant change on the part of the nonprofit sector. In short, in order to overcome each of the organizational challenges that prevent nonprofits from engaging in advocacy, the sector must first address the issues of culture and perception that seem to categorize advocacy as an afterthought at best, or wasteful at worst.

Hessenius (2007) asserts that advocacy is not merely an important practice for nonprofits, but an indispensable strategy for creating public value. Nonprofits, like corporations, are tasked with creating value for their shareholders. Nonprofits often assume that their shareholders are their clients or their staff, when in fact, their shareholders are the public at large. “Like for-profit corporations, there may be times when investment in aspects of the nonprofit (in this case in advocacy), will, in the long term, enhance public value, even if at the short-term expense of client and constituent benefits through the nonprofit’s programs and services” (Hessenius, 2007, pp. 19-20). Once this distinction is generally understood and accepted by the nonprofit sector, the sector can begin the difficult work of legitimizing advocacy as a critical practice and advancing sector-wide capacity to address systemic challenges.

The sector as a whole must overcome this general perception that advocacy efforts might somehow compromise the effectiveness of nonprofit programming and ultimately the impact nonprofits are able to achieve (Bradach, 2010). The key to building sector-wide support for advocacy and institutionalizing its practice at the organizational level is for nonprofits and funders alike to continue investing in and demonstrating the impact of their advocacy efforts, which will require first and foremost a meaningful and effective model for the evaluation of nonprofit advocacy. The creation of

such an evaluation model will bridge the gap between the potential for impact through advocacy and the ability of nonprofits to put advocacy into practice.

The Importance of Evaluating Advocacy: Confronting the Barriers

Despite the fact that both program evaluation and advocacy have been proven to contribute to overall nonprofit effectiveness, they both tend to be viewed as “peripheral activities” by nonprofit organizations, rather than as part of an organization’s “real work” (Berry, Arons, 2003, Festen and Philbin, 2007). Given, though, that advocacy and evaluation are both critical roles for impactful nonprofits, nonprofit organizations (and the foundations that fund them) should strive to ensure that both evaluation and advocacy are well-supported and engrained in their operations. Even more importantly, evaluation and advocacy should go hand-in-hand in nonprofit operations, with evaluation supporting and informing an organization’s messaging for advocacy initiatives, and advocacy initiatives being carefully evaluated. Skene-Pratt (2013) explains,

Evaluating advocacy efforts helps to assess the progress of your efforts and offers suggestions for navigating your work. Knowing if you are having an impact in educating your grassroots network, building relationships with policymakers and increasing the presence of your policy issue in the media are all ways to help guide your advocacy work. Assessing progress on these benchmarks will help you reach an ultimate goal, such as changing public policy (p. 41).

Evaluating advocacy initiatives can alleviate some of the barriers to advocacy that many nonprofit organizations experience, including the complexity of engaging in advocacy, a lack of funding for advocacy efforts, and the lack of legitimacy given to advocacy as a critical role for nonprofits. Nonprofits can use evaluation to contribute to organizational and coalition-wide learning around complex advocacy issues, to garner increased financial support for advocacy work, and to demonstrate their effectiveness in creating change through advocacy, thereby legitimizing the practice of advocacy to a wide spectrum of stakeholders. It is also important for funders to prioritize evaluation in advocacy in order to assess the progress of initiatives, aid grantees in advocacy planning, participate in organizational learning, gain perspective on the necessary time frames for achieving interim and long-term advocacy goals, and to establish expectations for future advocacy and advocacy capacity building grants (Alliance for Justice, 2005).

The Challenges of Evaluating Advocacy

The primary reason that nonprofits and foundations tend not to evaluate their advocacy initiatives, despite the strong potential for organizational and societal benefit, is that the practice of evaluating advocacy is still not well understood. Evaluating advocacy is significantly different from evaluating nonprofit services—evaluating direct-service programs typically entails measuring units, while the evaluation of advocacy requires measuring big-picture progress toward social change (Egbert and Hoehstetter, 2006). The primary challenges of evaluating advocacy can be summarized in three themes: time, budget, and complexity.

Challenges related to time include the fact that advocacy efforts tend to be long-term and social change is slow. A significant policy goal generally cannot be achieved or reported on within the scope of a typical grant cycle. Moreover, quality evaluation requires additional time at the beginning of, throughout, and following an advocacy initiative. Related to budget, building organizational capacity for both evaluation and advocacy requires a significant investment of dollars and other organizational resources. Also, both evaluation and advocacy tend to be viewed as peripheral practices for nonprofits, and most nonprofit organizations do not have a portion of their budget designated for advocacy, let alone for evaluating advocacy. Finally, the complex nature of the policy environment and high number of “players” that tend to be involved in an advocacy initiative makes evaluating advocacy challenging, to say the least. According to Alliance for Justice (2005),

The usual framework for evaluating direct services does not work well for advocacy. Grantmakers and grantees have to use a different framework to effectively evaluate advocacy...Advocacy is challenging to evaluate and measure. Policy change usually results from a combination of strategies and actions by multiple constituencies—it can be difficult to show “cause and effect” between one specific organization’s advocacy activity and a policy change. (p. 3).

In spite of the challenges associated with its practice, though, it is possible to meaningfully evaluate advocacy initiatives—and important to do so. In addition to employing a nonprofit advocacy evaluation framework or tool, there are a number of strategies that nonprofit organizations can employ to cope with the challenges of evaluating advocacy. First, nonprofits should plan for evaluation early, being sure to focus on

organizational readiness and to include evaluation in an overall advocacy plan. Second, given the complex and ever-changing nature of the policy environment, evaluators should be willing to acknowledge that proving cause and effect relationships may not always be possible (Egbert and Hoechstetter, 2006). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the evaluation of nonprofit advocacy work must be based on progress and trends, rather than a pass/fail approach to evaluating goals. According to Egbert and Hoechstetter (2006), “Flexibility should be viewed as a strength, and failure regarded as often unavoidable or temporary given the external forces under which nonprofit advocates must operate” (p. 5).

What to Evaluate: Key Dimensions of Advocacy Success

This section synthesizes the literature on nonprofit advocacy and evaluation to identify the most important evaluative indicators of nonprofit advocacy success. These themes, discussed in detail below, are critical to understanding and predicting success in nonprofit advocacy initiatives, and each theme must be addressed in any comprehensive framework for advocacy evaluation. It is important to note here, however, that each theme may not be applicable to each stage in the advocacy process—for example, while an analysis of an organization’s capacity to engage in advocacy is critically important during the planning phase of an advocacy initiative, it would be impossible to evaluate interim outcomes at this stage. The themes in the following section are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of advocacy success necessary to effectively evaluate the entire life cycle of an advocacy initiative.

Advocacy Capacity. A first (and ongoing) step in the evaluation of advocacy initiatives is to analyze the various dimensions that contribute to organizational capacity to engage in advocacy, to ensure success in advocacy efforts, and to sustain their impacts. The Alliance for Justice (2004) explains, “Capacity building strengthens the organization’s ability to anticipate, respond to, and advance policy issues. In the broadest sense, building advocacy capacity means developing an internal support structure, from staff to board members to organization members” (p. 34). Many of the dimensions identified later in this section also contribute to organizational capacity for advocacy, but a few indicators are fundamental to informing advocacy capacity.

The first, and most basic, of these indicators are the organization’s size and level of experience—larger organizations with more experience tend, unsurprisingly, to have a higher level of evaluation capacity (Alliance for Justice, 2005). Next, advocacy capacity includes the level of

organizational readiness for advocacy initiatives. Organizational readiness includes institutionalized support for advocacy—beginning with the Board of Directors, the development of formal policies and systems that will facilitate and regulate advocacy activity, and the creation and maintenance of formalized position statements in key policy areas to ensure proactive, rather than reactive, engagement with policy developments (Skene-Pratt, 2013). In addition to organizational readiness, it is important for evaluators to monitor organizational capacity over time. The first indicator of ongoing advocacy capacity is an organizational commitment to and resources for advocacy. The organization should demonstrate this commitment by including advocacy in its strategic planning process, developing and maintaining an advocacy agenda to guide priorities, and devoting a portion of its budget to advocacy work. Finally, the organization should demonstrate a commitment to building its collective knowledge and skills to best execute its agenda (Alliance for Justice, 2005).

Advocacy Network. An analysis of an organization's network is directly related to advocacy capacity, but is also a distinct dimension of advocacy success in itself. An organization's network for advocacy initiatives is comprised of its grassroots network (external stakeholders or membership), any formal or informal coalitions of which it is a member, and its relationships with decisionmakers. Teles and Schmitt (2011) describe advocacy network evaluation of an organization as “figuring out its reputation and influence in its policy space” (p. 9). While advocacy networks can be difficult to analyze and evaluate, this analysis is critical to predicting the success of an advocacy initiative (Teles and Schmitt, 2011).

The first component of this network, an organization's membership or broader grassroots network, is the foundation of any advocacy initiative. This network comprises the base from which an organization can draw to raise the profile of an issue and engage in calls to action (Alliance for Justice, 2005). In addition to a grassroots network, nonprofits can leverage the impact of their advocacy work through partnership in formal or informal advocacy coalitions, in which diverse stakeholders unite around a common advocacy or policy goal. According to Rangelhelli (2012), “Coalitions are needed to achieve statewide or significant policy reform... Collaboration on policy campaigns can bring many benefits: a broad geographic base of support; bridge building among diverse constituencies to create a united front; and a mix of skills and capacities to use a variety of tactics” (p. 5). Finally, the network analysis must include an organization's relationships with key decision makers. These relationships are key in advancing legislative or administrative policy goals and can also contribute to the success of an initiative indirectly through

these decisionmakers' relationships with other influential stakeholders (Skene-Pratt, 2013).

Advocacy Planning and Theories of Change. The next dimension of advocacy success for evaluators to consider is the quality of an organization or coalition's advocacy plans and theories of change. A theory of change is, essentially, an illustration of the ways in which an advocacy initiative is intended to catalyze systems change (Coffman, 2007). Reisman, Gienapp, and Stachowiak (2007) explain, "A theory of change typically addresses the set of linkages among strategies, outcomes and goals that support a broader mission or vision, along with the underlying assumptions that are related to these linkages" (p. 11). With an understanding of these linkages, the organization will then craft their advocacy plan by identifying their most important goals, the resources necessary to achieve those goals, and the audience, message, and appropriate messengers to advance their agenda (Skene-Pratt, 2013). This plan can take form as either a social change model—in which the end-goal of an initiative is to effect a change in behaviors or social conditions—or a policy change model, which makes the assumption that changes in policy will be adequate to catalyze the desired social change (Reisman, Gienapp, and Stachowiak, 2007). The model of a plan should inform its evaluation as each model represents a fundamentally different goal.

Advocacy Tactics and Strategies. The tactics and strategies of an advocacy initiative are dictated by the advocacy plan and theory of change. Advocacy tactics and strategies are the most frequently evaluated components of an advocacy initiative, likely due to the fact that the evaluation of advocacy tactics most closely resembles the evaluation of direct-service programs (Coffman, 2009). Examples of advocacy tactics include relationship building, direct or grassroots lobbying, conducting issue analysis, and the like. Evaluating an organization's ability to implement these strategies is certainly important to evaluating the overall success of an advocacy initiative, but these evaluative results cannot stand on their own. Coffman (2009) explains, "Although these measures capture what was done, they do little to explain how well it was done or how well it worked with target audiences" (p. 13).

Interim Progress. As mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the primary challenges of evaluating advocacy is that advocacy efforts are, by nature, long-term efforts, and the end results of these efforts are almost always impossible to reach within the scope of a typical grant cycle. For this reason, it is important for an advocacy plan (and an advocacy evaluation framework) to identify the interim goals that will be necessary to achieve an ultimate goal. Interim goals may include such objectives as

building new partnerships or alliances, building awareness of an issue, or heightening public will for a policy outcome (Coffman, 2009). These interim goals should be measured and valued as successes in themselves. Coffman (2007) notes, “All systems initiatives have their eyes on the ultimate prize—better impacts for the system’s intended beneficiaries...It is important to identify outcomes that set the stage for longer-term impact and to avoid assigning a lesser-class status to those outcomes” (p. 5). Identifying the interim benchmarks that will ensure success of the initiative over time provides a basis for demonstrating advocacy effectiveness within the scope of a grant cycle and allow practitioners to evaluate the interim success of their strategies in order to make adjustments where necessary.

Advocacy Outcomes and Social Impact. High-level advocacy outcomes are one of the most difficult components of advocacy initiatives to evaluate, for all of the reasons previously discussed—evaluation of these outcomes involves tensions between challenges of time, budget, and complexity. These outcomes tend to be the ultimate goals of an advocacy initiative, and may include policy development, policy adoption, or improved services and systems (Coffman, 2009). The intended outcomes and the associated social impact are represented in an advocacy plan and theory of change, but will otherwise be impossible to evaluate early in an advocacy effort. According to the Alliance for Justice (2004), “Outcome benchmarks can take years to achieve and then still be incomplete. They usually build upon progress and capacity building efforts” (p. 37). As an advocacy effort begins to narrow in on some of its long-term outcomes, however, these outcomes can be framed and evaluated based on five indicators of social change. According to Festen and Philbin (2007), the five indicators of social change include “a shift in definitions, a shift in behavior, a shift in engagement, a shift in policy, and maintaining past gains” (pp. 67-68). As an advocacy effort begins to achieve success in one or more of these areas, an evaluator can demonstrate tangible progress toward the advocacy initiative’s goal to achieve social change.

Relationship to Other Programs—Leverage and Return on Investment. A dimension that is often overlooked in evaluating the success of advocacy initiatives is the advocacy effort’s relationship to an organization’s direct service programs and the overall return on investment at the organization- or sector-wide level. The potential for advocacy to leverage the effectiveness of an organization’s direct-service programs was discussed earlier in the paper, including the potential for advocacy work to create new strategies to address social problems, to build important relationships, and to create or tap into new sources of funding (Crutchfield and Grant, 2008). This relationship is important to understand as nonprofits

seek to demonstrate the comprehensive impact of advocacy work on their organizational effectiveness.

Ranghelli (2012) notes that individual organizations or coalitions can also determine a tangible, financial return-on-investment from advocacy initiatives. One large-scale project “documented \$26.6 billion in benefits for taxpayers and communities in thirteen states, and found that every dollar grantmakers and other donors invested in policy and civic engagement provide a return of \$115 in community benefit” (p. 1). In addition to demonstrating success in achieving social change, evaluating the organizational leverage and overall social return-on-investment allows organizations to tell the complete story of the impact of advocacy and makes the case for sector-wide engagement in advocacy at higher rates.

Organizational Learning. A final key dimension of advocacy success is an advocacy effort’s contribution to organizational learning. Organizational learning should be evaluated and applied throughout an advocacy initiative as well as at the end of an initiative. Coffman (2007) explains, “Strategic learning refers to advocates’ (or funders’) need for real-time data to inform their ongoing strategies. As data are returned, they can be used to learn what strategies or tactics are working well and where midcourse corrections may be needed” (p. 5). This learning can also be applied to future advocacy efforts, as an organization learns which tactics and strategies are most effective in achieving its goals, and can be used to improve the effectiveness of advocacy work sector-wide through the development of best practices (Coffman, 2007). As an organization learns how to conduct advocacy most effectively, this learning feeds into a continuous cycle of maximizing the effectiveness and success of advocacy work, which directly contributes to overall organizational effectiveness and the potential for creating public value.

CONCLUSION

We can reasonably assume that the primary challenges of evaluating nonprofit advocacy initiatives—time, budget, and complexity—will persist indefinitely for most nonprofits. The practice of advocacy evaluation, however—with its potential to heighten advocacy success, contribute to organizational effectiveness, and catalyze systems change—is too important to avoid, in spite of the given challenges. This necessitates the development of strategies and principles that allow practitioners to work within the context created by these challenges. The first step toward bolstering successful evaluation within this context is recognizing that evaluation of advocacy is a distinct practice apart from the evaluation of

direct services. Understanding the dimensions most indicative of effective and impactful advocacy work is key to improving advocacy evaluation practice and providing meaningful data that can truly tell a story. That story—the ability to demonstrate success, present lessons learned, and inform theories of change—reinforces advocacy as an integral role of nonprofit organizations: a strategy to advance nonprofit missions and achieve deep social impact.

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