

MAKING DATA MORE USEFUL

FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF THE NATIONAL FUND

Prepared by Program and Policy Insight
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INTRODUCTION

Evaluation Tools: Using Qualitative and Quantitative Information

The National Fund commissioned this research to respond to priorities identified in the National Fund network's Learning Agenda. In particular, collaboratives were interested in effective strategies to gather data and use those data to understand participant progress and make program improvements.

The purpose of this report is to provide regional collaboratives, industry partnerships, and service providers with insights from research across National Fund sites, focused on three primary questions:

- **1. Data collection**—What are the processes and systems used to collect data by National Fund regional collaboratives and industry partnerships—especially those with consistently high(er)-quality data?
- **2. Data utilization and learning**—What do we know about how regional collaboratives and industry partnerships analyze and use data to inform program practice and strategy?
- **3. Implications**—What are the implications for the data collection, utilization, and learning activities of regional collaboratives and industry partnerships, as well as for future National Fund strategies?

In pursuit of these questions, the research team drew on its collective experience evaluating the National Fund, collaboratives, and partnerships since 2007. The team reviewed and studied past documents, memos, and reports generated over nine years of evaluation activities with the National Fund. The research team also carried out new research steps to understand and analyze current issues, challenges, and opportunities that the collaboratives and partnerships encounter.

The research steps included:

- Review of literature in the field of national data collection practices and lessons for national and multisite workforce development efforts, including the Benchmarking Project¹;
- Review of National Fund site-level reporting practices and data quality;
- Analysis and identification of collaboratives and partnerships generating high-quality data reports;
- Site visits to National Fund collaboratives and partnerships to review on-the-ground practices and lessons from site-level data collection, utilization, and learning; and
- Interviews with national data experts in workforce development, evaluators for collaboratives, and select former and current collaborative leaders.

Findings

The findings indicate the importance of organizational leadership and staff putting in place intentional systems and processes that support quality data collection and meaningful use. Importantly, the findings also suggest that higher data quality is linked to how it is used to inform program design and practice. That is, the more likely that leadership and staff can use data to learn about program practice and improvements, the more likely data users will invest in making sure the data are of high quality. The recommendations are grouped into two main sections:

- **1. Findings about the data collection practices among collaboratives and partnerships, and**
- **2. Findings about how they utilize their data for learning and decision-making.**

Evaluation Tools: Using Qualitative and Quantitative Information

The National Fund is committed to tracking results, measuring value for its stakeholders, leveraging information and evaluations and sharing insights throughout its network. The Evaluation Tools series provides tangible advice and recommendations on how local organization can collect and use qualitative and quantitative information to improve their work. See <https://nationalfund.org/learning-evaluation/> for more information.

COLLABORATIVE/PARTNERSHIP DATA COLLECTION

1. Key demographic data are commonly collected, but data quality and consistency vary.

Most collaboratives/partnerships have been able to incorporate and collect key participant data variables requested by the National Fund. Indeed, the basic participant demographic, training, and job placement data requested by the National Fund are commonly collected by all collaboratives/partnerships. But data quality and consistency among partnerships vary considerably. The participant data elements that are most difficult to collect consistently are related to a few specific demographic characteristics and long-term employment retention, advancement, and wage outcomes. (See the following chart).

Missing Data

Data consistency varies among partnerships, with *half* of all partnerships missing more than 25 percent of data for at least one job placement variable. Among key demographic data, the most consistently missing data are “receipt of public benefits” and “criminal background at program entry,” with data missing for 54 and 52 percent of participants, respectively.

Missing data from collaboratives and partnerships reporting to the National Fund annual data collection for the national evaluation.

Demographic Data

Demographic Variable	Percent of Participants for whom data was Unknown/Missing through 2014 (n=67,209)
Gender	13%
Age	22%
Education Level	31%
Race	22%
Hispanic/Latino Origin	35%
English Proficiency	N/A
Employment Status at Entrance	14%
Most Recent Wage Level at Entrance	N/A
Public Benefits Receipt at Entrance	52%
Criminal Background Status	49%

Jobseeker Placement Data

Jobseeker Placement Variable	Percent of Participants for whom data is Unknown/Missing (n=19,299)
Job Placement in Target Sector	19%
Wage at Job Placement	15%
Hours at Placement	31%
Eligibility for Benefits at Placement	46%

Retention and Advancement Data

Overall Retention Variable	Percent of Jobseeker Partnerships Reporting in Related Categories	Percent of Incumbent Partnerships Reporting in Related Categories
	Unknown/Missing	Unknown/Missing
6-Month Retention Achieved	15%	21%
12-Month Retention Achieved	20%	17%
Promotion at 12 Months	25%	16%
Wage Gain at 12 Months	15%	10%

WHAT'S WORKING: EMPLOYER INPUT INTO DATA COLLECTION—CENTRAL IOWA WORKS

Central Iowa Works (CIW) in Des Moines worked closely with its healthcare employer partnership to identify metrics that mattered most to their employer partners. As part of that effort, **UnityPoint Health** identified three metrics that were critical for improvement: the internal promotion rate of frontline employees, job retention in key entry-level areas like food service and environmental services, and patient satisfaction rates. Having these metrics as a focus helped CIW work with UnityPoint Health to design a series of leadership training modules and coaching services for frontline workers that contributed to improvements in these metrics.

CIW is also working with its **Advanced Manufacturing Partnership** employers to get answers to the question: “What would make you more likely to hire someone from CIW-funded training programs?” Initial answers have been broad: less training time required after hire, better job retention, and better job performance. But this has started the conversation on meaningful ways that those outcomes could be measured².

2. Collaboratives and partnerships report several motivations for collecting more complete demographic data.

The **Central Iowa Works** collaborative emphasizes the collection of demographic data from its partnerships for three main reasons. First, the collaborative is particularly interested in making sure they are serving those who are “left behind”. So, it’s important to them that they capture complete demographic data in order to get an accurate assessment of their participants. Second, the completeness of demographic data helps them to identify extra support needs for participants in training (which also has been useful in advocating for additional state resources.) Third, having good demographic data available for employers has helped CIW be a resource for employers looking to hire or promote a more diverse workforce.

3. Upfront involvement of employers and key stakeholders in data design and collection helps establish good data metrics and improves data quality.

Business Leaders United, an affiliate of the National Fund, recommends getting employers involved much earlier in the data collection and analysis process. This includes defining inputs, identifying elements of services that are important, and defining outcomes that reflect business goals. Employers are less likely to use program data or get engaged in data operations that have little meaning to them. For the most part, the research found that employer partners are not involved in upfront design of data collection processes in many National Fund collaboratives, including what variables and outcomes to

collect for employed participants or for business services, and how to capture that data. Collaboratives feel like their understanding of how to confidently collect employer-focused outcome data is an area that is in its infancy and, more generally, in need of additional support.

COMMON DATA SYSTEMS

National Fund evaluation research in previous years suggests common data systems in use include: ETO, G*STARS, EKOS, Salesforce, Apricot, Geographic Solutions, and spreadsheets.

Keys to Employer Input and Data Use

- The authors of the *CareerSTAT Guide to Investing in Frontline Health Care Workers* identify a number of issues to raise when engaging employers in data design³:
- At the planning stages, it is critical for employers to determine what to measure and why.
- Having decided what to measure, employers / providers must answer the question, “compared to what?”
- Collecting data and making it usable are challenges for many employers
- When developing employer metrics, make sure the data can provide insights on what led to a change

WHAT'S WORKING: ADAPTING A WORKFORCE DATA SYSTEM—PACES

PACES in Kansas developed a flexible data collection system used in parallel with the region's public workforce development system. Beginning in 2008, the collaborative first utilized the **KansasWorks** database, developed by **America's Job Link Alliance (AJLA)**, which is the national Workforce Investment Act / Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act data system used in Kansas and 13 other states. This system did not fully meet the flexibility needed by the **Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas** (the regional public Workforce Development Board, or Workforce Alliance), so the Workforce Alliance, on behalf of PACES, initiated a request for proposal (RFP) process in 2010 to select a data collection and management system that would meet the needs of the initiative. The RFP for a *Workforce Development Case Management / Fiscal Data Management System* was specific about their need to customize data that goes into and out of the system. They ultimately contracted with **Geographic Solutions (GS)**, which is utilized by 37 states for WIA/WIOA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and labor market data⁴.

PACES has found GS to be very flexible; they can modify analyses and reporting for specific funding streams and create program-specific documents, yet all data will still roll into an aggregate PACES report. To facilitate data collection, Workforce Alliance staff developed detailed intake forms that are used by the program case managers. All of the data on the forms are entered into the database on an ongoing basis and the intake questions can be modified in real time, which accommodates changing funder requests. Although use of this system requires some double entry between the Kansas Works AJLA system and the Workforce Alliance's GS system, they note that the flexibility and accessibility of the GS system compensates for any additional reporting.

4. Data system sophistication varies, and new system implementation can be overwhelming.

The systems that collaboratives and partnerships have established to collect the participant information vary widely—between collaboratives and, at times, between partnerships within a collaborative. Partnerships often must adapt legacy systems or find ways to create new systems to collect participant-level variables. Overall, collaboratives and partnerships seek widely used, consistent, and supported data collection systems. The cost of purchasing and customizing a robust data collection system that is easy to use and fully meets the needs of the collaborative and partnership is often a barrier. Some collaboratives and partnerships have addressed this barrier by leveraging existing institutional data systems. (See “What's Working: Adapting a Workforce Data System—PACES”).

5. Limited staff capacity to process data is a pervasive barrier across partnership sites, and frontline staff struggle to connect reporting requirements to their work.

Most often the bulk of participant data collection and outcome reporting is the responsibility of frontline trainers, job developers, and case managers. Smaller, community-based partnerships, in particular, often have thin resources and staff capacity to support robust data collection processes among frontline workers. In part, this leads to irregular and inconsistent data collection practice. Ensuring accurate data sets is a time-consuming task for partnerships whose staff are already stretched

addressing participant and employer needs. “I worry about the quality of data input and if it is accurate,” reflects a staff manager at an industry partnership in Baltimore. “I spend a lot of time coaching case managers on data input. Creating consistency in data input and definitions is difficult across staff.”

Moreover, if frontline workers do not experience how the data are also useful to their own work, or how they could help the organization better meet customer needs, their motivation to ensure the quality of the data is lower. Frontline staff also may have varied abilities to use technology to enter data and generate reports that could be useful, which further inhibits data quality.

6. Intensive focus by collaborative staff is often essential to produce quality data.

Among regional collaboratives that consistently produce higher-quality data, there is often a staff person who dedicates very significant time to data verification and cleaning. For example, the **Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative** has appointed a data user coordinator position that plays a critical role in working with partnerships to verify the quality of the data and to shape consistent and accurate National Fund data submissions. For its part, **Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC)** hires an industry coordinator for each sector to build an ongoing relationship with employers and centralize data collection within each partnership.

WHAT'S WORKING: PAYMENTS TIED TO DATA—CENTRAL IOWA WORKS

In Des Moines CIW has found that tying payments for skills training and other services to the receipt of complete data has helped to greatly improve their data quality. Their memorandum of agreement, used with all subgrantees, provides that half of the contracted amount will be paid when the contract is executed. Payment of the other half is contingent upon the grantee's submission of monthly status reports and final reports (on templates provided by CIW) concerning participant demographics, services provided, and outcomes⁵.

The memorandum of agreement has also proved useful by clarifying for individual employers why they need to provide information on wages or advancement after incumbent worker training is provided by a CIW grantee (e.g., the community college). It helps the employer understand that funding for the training actually comes from CIW, making them more open to follow up by CIW or the grantee.

7. Training on and documentation of data reporting expectations can boost data quality among partnerships.

In interviews most collaboratives noted the importance of documenting their efforts through organizational protocols, which helps maintain institutional memory and data capacity in case of staff turnover. As one example, SkillWorks asks each partnership to follow its Data Collection and Reporting Requirements⁶, posts a customized SkillWorks version of the National Fund data dictionary⁷ for their partnerships, and then hosts a recorded data webinar training (see SkillWorks Phase III Reporting Schedule and Updates and webinar⁸) to answer questions and discuss partnership data collection and submission.

8. Explicit written agreements can help codify and incentivize data collection with external partners.

Many collaboratives and partnerships report that they lack sufficient staff capacity or resources to adequately track good data, especially outcome data like job retention and wages. Some collaboratives have found that establishing a written memorandum of understanding (MOU) with employers and partnership providers helps them obtain data more easily from training providers and employers. SAWDC uses an MOU, such as its MOU with VT Mobile Aerospace Engineering and Alabama Technology Network⁹, to establish data collection requirements for its employer partners. SAWDC says there are three key elements written into the MOU that make it successful. First, they require

that the employer work with the collaborative to ensure that all National Fund-specific data collection and other reporting requirements are met in a timely manner. Second, they require that the employer use the *National Fund Data Collection and Reporting Guide*¹⁰ to provide the collaborative with the required data. Third, the agreement states that the employer will provide the collaborative with any other information as required by the National Fund.

CIW also uses MOU agreements, and they tie their payments to partners for skills training to their submission of completed data. (See "What's Working: Payments Tied to Data—Central Iowa Works.")

9. There is great interest in connecting to state and federal longitudinal data sets, although access remains limited.

More focus and research on the longterm outcomes of workforce development programs are central to understanding the full value of collaborative and industry partnership work. Connecting to state and longitudinal data sets such as the Unemployment Insurance Wage Records would allow collaboratives and partnerships to better track their participants' longer-term employment, retention, and earnings outcomes. Data experts say there are still issues such as privacy protection, data security assurances, and cost that get in the way of states sharing access to these data with non-public, third-party entities like regional collaboratives. The **Workforce Data Quality Campaign**, one of the National Fund's partners, is leading a national effort to understand and overcome some of these barriers.

WHAT'S WORKING: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PARTNERSHIPS HAVE ACCESS TO LONG-TERM WAGE DATA—MSPWIN

The **Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Workforce Innovation Network** is leveraging its resources and influence as a collaborative to increase transparency and learning about outcomes from the state's workforce system, with a special focus on outcomes for people of color. Results of this work include state legislation that established standardized outcomes and an online public *Performance Measures Report Card* for programs funded through the state's workforce development fund. MSPWin also supports a broader working group of public agencies, private funders, educators, and workforce providers focused on tracking shared outcome measures and implementing evidence-based practices.

These and other related initiatives would not be possible without the support of the state's **Department of Employment and Economic Development** to share use of its Workforce One database and provide access to long-term wage data. The database is now a portal for individual participant data from TANF providers, United Way grantees, and others outside of DEED-funded programs. Access to wage data is already helping these stakeholders better understand the long-term effect their services are having on earnings for different groups of participants. It is laying the foundation for further work to understand how different services and strategies relate to outcomes over time, and for better communicating return on investment for funder investments.

10. A small number of collaboratives have been able to negotiate and gain access to the unemployment insurance wage records.

Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW) is one of the more recognized collaborative efforts that has successfully been able to link its participant data to a state Unemployment Insurance wage record system. PCW has used these data to link participant outcomes to long-term earnings and income generating activity captured by the UI wage records. The type of agreement that PCW negotiated with the State of Ohio is similar to the one that **IMPAQ International**, the National Fund's evaluator for its Social Innovation Fund grant, negotiated as an *Agreement for Disclosure of Unemployment Insurance Data and Information*¹¹ with the State of Wisconsin.

The **Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Workforce Innovation Network (MSPWin)** is another example of a collaborative that successfully lobbied for and then developed a data system that links to the state UI wage record system. Leaders of the MSPWin collaborative say there were three keys to putting together this system. First, they wrote the specific legislation (116L.98 Workforce Program Outcomes) ahead of time to mandate a uniform outcome measurement and reporting system for adult workforce-related programs. Second, they used professional lobbyists to work with legislators and made presentations using data visualizations to demonstrate what could be possible. Third, once the legislation passed, MSPWin allocated some additional funds to help the state agency create an online dashboard. (See "What's Working: What Happens When Partnerships Have Access to Long-Term Wage Data—MSPWin.")

11. There is widespread interest in connecting national fund data collection with other national data sets.

There is also interest in making greater connection to the process and data elements of other national data sets such as the **Workforce Benchmarking Network**, **National Student Clearinghouse**, and similar efforts. Connection to, and possibly alignment with, larger data sets would reduce redundancy, increase access to more relevant comparative program data, and provide new analysis possibilities.

12. Data collection and quality are stronger in partnerships that are committed to supporting a strong learning culture.

According to national experts interviewed for this research, an organization's learning culture strongly affects data collection and practice. The **Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative** has used a partnership self-assessment tool to help its partnerships strengthen their organizational culture to support data learning. The tool, called *Strengthening Our Culture for Data Use and Continuous Improvement*¹³, uses a matrix with 17 variables that enables partnerships to assess how well their organizational culture supports the use of data for continuous improvement. The tool, created by the Workforce Benchmarking Network, also prompts partnerships to identify steps for how to improve their data learning culture.

COLLABORATIVE/PARTNERSHIP DATA UTILIZATION AND LEARNING

1. Leaders have an important role in establishing a culture where data quality is valued and regularly used at multiple levels to make decisions.

According to research by the Workforce Benchmarking Network, organizations committed to using data internally for learning and improvement are more likely to have systems in place to ensure data quality and to provide staff training around ways that data can be useful to them. The research also found that leadership messaging focused on the importance of data learning and its quality will likely improve data collection. (See “What’s Working: Senior Leadership Driving Organizational Learning Culture”).

2. Collaborative staff and evaluators often play a central role in the interpretation and analysis of partnership participant and program data.

On their own, it appears that most partnerships have insufficient staff capacity and knowledge to analyze and then interpret data at a high level as it applies to their program design and delivery. Some collaboratives fill this gap with designated staff or a local evaluator who becomes a central figure in the promotion of organizational and program learning. Despite the importance of this role, time and resources devoted by collaboratives to support it is not uniform. Some collaboratives make this a continuous focus, while for others it is more intermittent in importance or left behind altogether. (See “What’s Working: Promoting Learning among Partnerships—SkillWorks.”)

3. Results-oriented funding may inadvertently impact the opportunity for data learning.

Often a principal motivation for partnerships to collect data is in response to a funder request or requirement. Among some partnerships there is a perception and concern that funders are mainly interested in collecting data for outcomes, and less interested in using data for substantive “learning” or as an opportunity to make adjustments to program strategy and practice. In addition, some say that funders may not appreciate the time or effort required to ramp up and develop systems that support good data collection, or the effort to interpret and learn from the data once it is collected. Finally, although funders may be more focused on indicators of long-term outcomes, reporting timeframes are often too short to capture these changes.

Additionally, the focus on quantitative outcome data may overlook the explanatory value of qualitative data and interim information on outputs, which can be just as instructive for programmatic refinement. For example, **Workforce Central’s** funding partners intentionally cultivate a balanced approach to its data collection, one that emphasizes qualitative and quantitative data that is oriented over a long enough timeframe to encourage learning and sufficiently capture the outcomes of the program. (See “What’s Working: Funder Learning As A Priority—Central Wisconsin.”)

4. There is demand for more “safe spaces” to share data findings for program learning and improvement.

Some partnerships are sensitive to the overt or subtle pressure to “perform” for the regional funders and are therefore somewhat guarded in how transparent they are with sharing program data that show less-than-ideal results. Collaboratives often provide expertise, a neutral voice, and a safe space for discussing data and its implications for program design and strategy. For example, the **Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative** convenes a Data Users Group that pulls together the seven partnerships involved in the collaborative. The BWFC uses the Data Users Group to introduce important topics and tools to the partnerships around data quality, reporting, and analysis. (See sidebar “Data Users Group Meeting Topics.”)

Data users group meeting topics

The Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative convenes a Data Users Group among its partnerships to increase data quality and learning. BWFC staff facilitate monthly meetings that have included:

- Data Collection and Management Practice
- Measuring and Improving Performance: Perspectives from the Workforce Field
- Self-Assessment: How Might We Improve Our Use of Data as a Resource for Improvement
- Review of Common Performance Measure Definitions
- Funder Reporting Commonalities and Differences
- Developing Employer and Client Surveys for Workforce Development

WHAT'S WORKING: SENIOR LEADERSHIP DRIVING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING CULTURE

An 18-month initiative with 16 nonprofit workforce development organizations in New York City and Chicago found that organizational learning and improvement is most effective when an organization's leaders set the tone by¹²:

- > Making sure that staff knows how the organization is doing on key performance indicators;
- > Setting high expectations for data quality;
- > Making time for reflection on the data as part of staff meetings;
- > Showing personal interest in the work of improvement teams by attending meetings;
- > Publicly recognizing staff for their data and improvement efforts; and
- > Encouraging staff to be innovative in their thinking and to try out new ideas.

Some local evaluators also perform this role. The **Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford** has used its local evaluator to facilitate discussion around the successes and challenges of its partnership investments and to raise the "hard" questions from the data, such as the example discussion *Progress and Evaluative Findings: Insights from Third Party Evaluation for Strategic Planning*¹⁵ that its local evaluator facilitated.

5. There is interest in alternative high-utility data products from the National Fund.

The current presentation of cumulative, aggregate data in the form of the *National Fund's Annual Data Brief*¹⁶ is not useful to collaboratives and partnerships. Very few collaboratives, if any, use the *National Data Brief* to inform their strategy or practice. Most collaboratives and partnerships say that they would like to see more program-relevant analysis that explores changes in participant characteristics, service participation, and other strategic components of program implementation and outcomes. Several interviewees remarked that the "number of people served" aggregate data element was not useful to them and was difficult to tie back to the outcomes produced.

6. Many collaboratives would welcome some type of benchmarking analysis.

There is widespread demand for more peer-to-peer interaction and other safe spaces to share, discuss, and learn from collected data. Many collaboratives also say they would welcome benchmarking as a way to identify meaningful comparison groups from which their partnerships could learn or gauge how they perform relative to similar programs and regions. But among some partnerships there is a level of caution as to how possible it is to create meaningful "apples-to-apples" comparison

groups among programs. Some collaboratives and partnerships, as well as funders, might need someone to work with them to curate and interpret benchmarking data and to help them learn from comparisons.

The National Fund is currently developing benchmarking reports that provide key partnership data within the context of overall and similarly oriented National Fund industry partnership peers. This internal benchmarking effort may address some of these concerns and provide more explicit opportunities to grow partnership capacity to interpret and learn from program data.

7. There is a strong desire to access more information on evidence-based practices.

Regional collaboratives and industry partnerships voiced interest in having someone or some organization sift through existing research and then communicate the evidence-based findings about effective practice to partnerships, collaboratives, and local funders. They also called for more opportunities to discuss these lessons through peer-to-researcher forums.

CONNECTING DATA SETS

Several National Fund partnerships connect to the Workforce Benchmarking Network and utilize its data set to compare program data. The National Student Clearinghouse is used to facilitate P-20 database development in several states, including linkages to workforce development data, thereby enabling research of progress and success.

WHAT'S WORKING: PROMOTING LEARNING AMONG PARTNERSHIPS—SKILLWORKS

Boston's **SkillWorks** institutionalizes a number of practices to bring together and facilitate data learning among its partnerships. One of these is the submission of narrative interpretative reports that accompany each partnership's data submissions. They highlight trends and issues that the data show have implications for program design and practice. In addition, SkillWorks asks their local evaluator to produce data-driven case studies for each partnership, and through the case studies encourages the partnerships to dig deeper into their data to answer specific program questions. An example of this type of data-based report is SkillWorks' *Hospitality Training Center Partnership Final Report*¹⁴, prepared by their local evaluator. SkillWorks also hosts quarterly project director calls during which the collaborative used data to ask and answer questions with the group of partnerships about their designs and practices.

WHAT'S WORKING: FUNDER LEARNING AS A PRIORITY—CENTRAL WISCONSIN

In Central Wisconsin's Workforce Central collaborative, convener and funder Incentive developed data-reporting expectations that built on its understanding and experience that long-term systems change does not always result in "fast-to-market" partnerships and quantitative results. Incentive intentionally cultivated a networked, holistic approach with relationships and shared purpose at the center, to emphasize that the work was about more than just training workers for jobs; it was about re-envisioning a community devastated by economic changes. Each partner invested and participated in a web of networked activities. The role of this diverse set of partners—CEOs, additional business representatives, funders, educators, and service providers—was to build training, worker support, and business and institutional cultures that were mutually reinforcing. It is an intentional systems change approach, led by institutional values, toward Incentive's simple yet bold vision: a community that works well for all people.

With that in mind, Workforce Central's evaluator, Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), focused its evaluation efforts equally on qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to capture relationship development, systems changes, and program outcomes. To complement the Workforce Central evaluation strategy, Incentive and COWS jointly developed and published Vital Signs, which places local data into context and pairs it with relevant examples that community members can understand. Vital Signs has become the region's most reliable source for economic data.

This qualitative and quantitative commitment to learning from data was also evident in Workforce Central's recent process to develop a business plan for their Manufacturing Partnership. Workforce Central used their evaluator as the facilitator for a four-meeting process. The process used a variety of data to inform future strategies: financial data to understand how resources stacked to support the work to date, Vital Signs data and local industry research to understand the regional context, and Workforce Central quantitative and partnership outcome data to understand the impact of the investments. Overall, Workforce Central's holistic progress is built on the long-term development of relationships, aligned purpose, and a solid foundation of data.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PARTNERSHIPS, REGIONAL COLLABORATIVES, AND THE NATIONAL FUND

DATA QUALITY: How can the partnerships, regional collaboratives, and national fund improve data quality?

- At the partnership level, develop local funding agreements with external partners that identify clear expectations about data collection and payment plans that support those expectations.
 - *Involve employers up front in data design discussions and then establish a memorandum of understanding with employers that includes mutual reporting expectations.*
 - *Tie payment for training or other services to complete and timely data submission, through a contract agreement.*
- Create internal data collection systems and protocols at the collaborative and partnership level that broaden staff capacity and institutionalize high-quality data collection.
 - *Develop and share data collection systems and protocols for partnerships, such as a data collection and reporting requirements manual based off the National Fund manual.*
 - *Host and then post recordings of webinars and workshops that capture the “how to” of reporting as a reminder to existing partnership staff, and as an update for newly hired partnership staff who will be collecting and reporting data.*
- Develop and share training modules to increase capacity for partnership frontline staff to collect data from participants, training providers, and employers.
 - *Provide collective guidance on “best-in-class” data-collection systems for partnerships to consider, integrating partnerships’ experience of system benefits and issues.*
 - *Sponsor training modules across collaboratives and partnerships, perhaps through a “Data Collection 101” or “best-in-class” series.*
- Share collaborative and partnership experience identifying meaningful business metrics, including levels of employer engagement and satisfaction.
- At the partnership and program level, have leadership establish and monitor annual goals to reduce the percentage of missing data on specific variables.

DATA UTILITY: How can the partnerships, regional collaboratives, and national fund improve data utility?

- Consider transitioning to an annual reporting period to reduce the burden of data collection and improve data quality.
- Convene a National Fund “data working group” to engage collaboratives and partnerships in a dialogue to identify data and products that would have the highest utility and to increase ownership of the process.
- Invest in and encourage participation in benchmarking efforts, including both internal National Fund benchmarking and the Workforce Benchmarking Network, to provide greater comparative context and opportunities for peer learning.
- Pursue greater connection of participant-level data to longitudinal data sets that better capture longterm retention and earnings outcomes. This would reduce the burden on frontline staff to capture this information, increase access to more relevant comparative program data, and provide new analysis possibilities.
- Advocate for and share working models of state and regional utilization of shared data collection and reporting systems.
- Provide peer guidance and suggested templates for implementing return-on-investment analysis and other select methodologies at the local level to support investment in sector-based training.
- Build a library of local evaluation reports and descriptions of other useful evaluation activities to assist peer collaboratives in identifying the best form and type of local evaluation to pursue.
- Enhance the National Fund reporting framework to include questions that promote learning and reflection as much as absolute outcome metrics (e.g., greater focus on data patterns, trends, and implications).

DATA LEARNING: How can the partnerships, regional collaboratives, and national fund support data learning for program practice and improvement?

- Create opportunities for “safe” discussion at the partnership and collaborative level about outcomes, data findings, and implications for program strategy.
 - Create a data users group or other regular forum for partnerships organized by collaborative staff and/or local evaluators.
 - As an extension of the data users group or forum, provide regular occasions for employer discussion of data that reflect employers’ own business metrics and worker outcomes, how that data can be collected, and whether engagement with the partnership is working (e.g., partnership satisfaction).
 - Create opportunities to identify programmatic questions of interest that can be pursued with existing data, or with other data that could be easily collected.
 - Create explicit opportunities for learning from data across all staff levels of partnerships and collaboratives to illustrate the benefits of high-quality data to program implementation, and to integrate a culture of learning over time.
 - Use existing partnership examples and tools, like the self-assessment tool *Strengthening Our Culture for Data Use and Continuous Improvement*, to prompt partnerships to identify steps for improving their data.
- Continue to create additional safe spaces—such as affinity groups in site-director meetings—for intentional analysis and learning from data around challenges facing collaboratives and partnerships.
 - Pursue even more opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing, and facilitate more explicit communications and discussion on national data trends and how those trends might inform practice and policy among partnerships and collaboratives.

- Develop and provide access to capacity building opportunities (workshops, webinars, peer learning groups, etc.) to help partnership and collaborative staff strengthen their own use of data for learning and improvement.
- Improve access to evidence-based practices through peer-to-researcher forums, dissemination of best-practice research findings, and referral to existing best-practice clearinghouses or networks.
- Identify more useful National Fund report formats, such as: a brief deliverable that is focused on select key questions or information; a flip book that provides comprehensive charts of the key data analysis, with succinct bullets that identify trends and implications; and an ad hoc analysis that provides exploratory white papers or further analyses of selected trends.

CONCLUSION

The initial focus of the research task was to understand how the National Fund, through its regional collaboratives and industry partnerships, could improve the quality of its national data collection. The research quickly reinforced the link between data utility and higher-quality data, and the task expanded beyond data collection processes to explore data use and learning. As the National Fund moves forward, a fundamental component of the effort to improve data quality will be to build a learning community of practice that uses data to inform program practice and strategy. The recommendations outlined in this report could provide a road map for partnerships, regional collaboratives, and the National Fund to take new steps to improve data quality, data utility, and data learning.

ENDNOTES

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The National Fund for Workforce Solutions is a national network promoting economic opportunity and prosperous communities through investment and innovation. Based in Washington D.C., the National Fund partners with philanthropy, employers, workers, public and private community organizations, and more than 30 regional collaboratives to invest in skills, improve workforce systems, and generate good jobs. Learn more about the National Fund and its local partners at www.NationalFund.org.