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Academic and Nonprofit Partnerships Can Enhance Capacity Building

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Abstract

This PRAXIS-oriented article explores how individual faculty members on research sabbatical can support nonprofit and community-based organizations through capacity-building partnerships. Drawing on detailed field notes from a semester-long collaboration with six nonprofit organizations and one government agency, the article illustrates concrete ways that academic expertise can strengthen data collection, evaluation, and strategic planning, while also improving the quality of the partnership between the academic partner and the organization. These findings are contextualized in the literature on academic-nonprofit collaboration and framed as a reflective case study that highlights implications for practice, especially for faculty at metropolitan universities.

Keywords: capacity building, program evaluation, participatory research, partnership

Introduction

Recent years have seen rapid growth in academic and nonprofit partnerships (Pianko & Jarrett, 2012). From groundbreaking research to community outreach programs, such partnerships are a testament to the power of combined expertise and resources. These partnerships commonly take the form of formalized relationships between nonprofit or community-based organizations and whole universities or departments (Baker & Meletzke, 2021; Butcher, Bezzina, & Moran, 2011; Hogan et al., 2017; Merzel et al., 2007; Maurrasse, 2002; Sheikhattari et al., 2022; Suiter et al., 2024). However, little research has explored academic-nonprofit partnerships on a smaller scale, such as more informal collaboration between an individual faculty member and nonprofit organizations.

This article presents a PRAXIS-oriented case study of my semester-long research sabbatical, during which I partnered with six nonprofit organizations and one government agency to support their capacity-building efforts. All of the organizations focused in some way on issues related to crime, justice, or the criminal legal system, but they differed widely in size and in their existing infrastructure for data collection, analysis, and program evaluation. Rather than positioning the project as a traditional research study, this article offers a reflective account of the practical strategies employed, the reciprocal learning that occurred, and the challenges that emerged along the way. Drawing on detailed field notes, I highlight how academic skills can be mobilized in service of community goals and consider the broader implications for faculty engagement at metropolitan universities. The article also surfaces common challenges that emerged in navigating these partnerships and offers insights for faculty, particularly at metropolitan universities, who may be interested in using sabbatical time to engage in community-based work with tangible, real-world impact.

Literature Review: Existing Research on Nonprofit-Academic Partnerships

While sabbaticals have traditionally been framed as a time for faculty to pursue research, writing, or professional development away from their regular responsibilities, there is potential for sabbaticals to support deeper engagement with communities. Sabbatical leave can offer faculty a rare opportunity to contribute their skills beyond the university, particularly through partnerships that advance public-serving missions (O'Meara, 2008). Scholars have called for more expansive definitions of faculty service that include community-engaged work, especially when such work is rooted in long-term relationships and reciprocal benefits (Saltmarsh, Giles, Ward, & Buglione, 2009). In metropolitan university contexts, where civic engagement and responsiveness to urban challenges are often central to institutional identity, faculty sabbaticals can be an underutilized mechanism for advancing social change. Despite this potential, little research has documented how faculty use sabbaticals to build community capacity, highlighting the need for reflective case studies like the one presented here.

Nonprofit-academic partnerships are increasingly recognized as vehicles for mutual learning, knowledge co-production, and social impact, but their success depends on careful relationship development and shared commitment. Partnership development theory offers a useful framework for understanding how academic-practitioner collaborations emerge, evolve, and generate mutual benefit. Scholars have emphasized that effective partnerships are built not only on shared goals but also on trust, communication, and a balance of power between parties (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Holland, 2001). Partnerships often progress through distinct stages, from initial engagement and relationship-building to shared project implementation and long-term sustainability (Butterfoss et al., 1996; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). For metropolitan universities in particular—whose missions often emphasize civic engagement, urban impact, and public-serving scholarship—these types of partnerships are especially relevant. Faculty engagement in sustained, equity-oriented collaborations with local nonprofits can help universities live out their public missions while responding to the complex and evolving needs of urban communities. As will be explained further below, this sabbatical project reflects key elements of the partnership development model: it emerged from pre-existing relationships, evolved through collaborative identification of needs, and prioritized capacity-building that aligned with each organization's goals. Understanding the work through this lens helps to illuminate both the promise and complexity of faculty engagement with community partners.

My intention to use my sabbatical semester to partner with nonprofit organizations seeking capacity-building assistance was largely inspired by the existing literature on nonprofit-academic collaborations. Perhaps the largest body of research on nonprofit-academic partnerships has been in the area of health promotion (Carney, Maltby, Mackin, & Maksym, 2011; Mayer, Braband, & Killen, 2017; Merzel et al., 2007; Seifer, 2009; Sheikhattari et al., 2022; Wallerstein et al., 2018). This work often employs a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. CBPR can be defined as

> a collaborative, partnership approach to research that equitably involves, for example, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. Partners contribute their expertise and share responsibilities and ownership to increase understanding of a given phenomenon, and incorporate the knowledge gained with action to enhance the health and well-being of community members (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001, 184).

This model of research differs from more traditional health promotion or public health initiatives in which the academic partner may be viewed as the "expert" positioned to instruct community members about their health or well-being. In a CBPR project, all partners are believed to have expertise to contribute to the research. Taking this concept one step further, a related research framework has been identified as "community-driven research," in which the community partners are positioned as the research leaders (Manzo et al., 2023).

My sabbatical work prioritized responsiveness to community-defined needs, treated nonprofit leaders as co-creators of the work, and sought to build organizational capacity in ways that would persist beyond my involvement. As such, CBPR offers a useful conceptual frame for understanding the values and structure that guided this project.

Yale School of Medicine has summarized the benefits of CBPR for both parties involved. CBPR can enable academic researchers to:

- “Increase the validity within the study by improving accuracy of measurements
- Conduct research that can be implemented in partnership with the studied communities
- Design meaningful and effective community interventions that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for communities” (Yale School of Medicine, 2021).

Additionally, community organizations also experience a number of benefits from CBPR, including the opportunity to:

- “Ask questions that are meaningful to their community members
- Develop and evaluate effective programs for their clients
- Demonstrate effectiveness of their programs for future funding opportunities
- Increase the legitimacy of their work among funders, policy-makers and other stakeholders” (Yale School of Medicine, 2021).

CBPR thus facilitates the opportunity for deeply impactful and long-lasting health promotion interventions.

Another area of relevant research has examined academic partnerships with practitioners in corporate management (Bartunek, 2007; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Orr & Bennett, 2009; Van de Ven, 2018). While not focused on work with nonprofit or community-based organizations, this fairly extensive literature can still provide guidance on how academics can work with partners outside of academia in mutually beneficial ways. Tapping into some of the benefits of a CBPR approach, some of the literature on academic-practitioner relationships in the business world emphasizes the importance of building collaborative partnerships that are rooted in equity and mutual benefit for all parties involved. For example, Van de Ven (2018) summarizes a widespread challenge by explaining that:

> Research that is negotiated with versus for practitioners creates a very different relationship between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners often view the researcher as a consultant who is expected to solve their particular problem… Sometimes academics are less interested in the client's particular problem, but more interested in the general class of phenomena of which the particular problem is a part. Here, the academic may be willing to serve as a research consultant for the client in exchange for obtaining resources and data needed to pursue his or her own basic research agenda. Given these kinds of divergent interests, academics and practitioners often engage in a mixed-motive tit-for-tat exchange relationship that often results in win-lose or lose-lose situations. (39)

Successful partnerships require a clear plan for how research can be co-designed and implemented so that the "divergent interests" of academics and practitioners can be managed appropriately.

A substantial amount of community-based or community-engaged research has been done in the area of criminal justice, including work partnering with people currently incarcerated (Dewey, VandeBerg, & Tennant-Caine, 2024; Farrell, Young, Buck Willison, & Fine, 2021), focusing on rehabilitation from substance use disorders (Corrigan, 2024), generating definitions of public safety (Johnson et al., 2022), creating crime prevention strategies (Brown & Stalker, 2020), and evaluating prisoner reentry (Swaner & Sheppard, 2022). Much of this work has revolved around academic engagement with community members or individuals impacted by the criminal legal system, as opposed to capacity-building work with nonprofit organizations. The current study builds upon prior community-engaged criminal justice research by working with organizations serving individuals impacted by the criminal legal system.

Additionally, the majority of the existing literature documents partnerships between nonprofits and entire schools, universities, or departments (Baker & Meletzke, 2021; Butcher et al., 2011; Hogan et al., 2017; Holton et al., 2016; Kezar, 2007; Merzel et al., 2007; Maurrasse, 2002; Sheikhattari et al., 2022; Suiter et al., 2024). Much less documentation exists on what an individual faculty member can do with various nonprofits on a smaller scale over the course of one semester. The current study also seeks to contribute to this gap in the literature.

Research Methods

Case Description: The Organizational Partners

During my semester-long research sabbatical, I collaborated with several nonprofits and one government agency, all of which I had at least some degree of a previous relationship. Some of these organizations had sought my advice on capacity building or program evaluation in the past. Others had hosted my undergraduate students as interns or had their staff members serve as guest speakers in my undergraduate classes. Additionally, two of the organizations had invited me to join their boards of directors.

As further detailed in Table I, all seven organizations focus on issues related to the criminal legal system, but engage in fairly different activities. The approximate size of the organizations varies, with some organizations having fewer than five staff members and the one government agency having a staff greater than 25 people.

TABLE 1. Partner organizations

Org. Pseudonym	Type	Main Activities	Approx. Size of Org. Staff
Org. A	Nonprofit	Prison monitoring, education and advocacy, support services	10 – 15
Org. B	Nonprofit	Seeking restoration for individuals and families impacted by medical experiments in prison	Fewer than 5
Org. C	Nonprofit	Support for returning citizens and weekly food bank locations	Fewer than 5
Org. D	Nonprofit	Dog training and support services for those involved in criminal legal system	5 – 10
Org. E	Nonprofit	Decision making classes for people incarcerated	Fewer than 5
Org. F	Nonprofit	Prison education program	5 – 10
Org. G	Government agency	Support services, programs, and advocacy for crime victims	25+

Prior to my sabbatical semester, I informally shared with the organizations that I planned to spend the semester in partnership with groups that could use guidance on capacity building or program evaluation. Three of the seven organizations had very clear and specific ideas for what they wanted assistance with, while the others sought my advice on how to begin improving data collection and program evaluation plans. For all of the organizations, including the ones that started with some ideas about what they wanted, I first began a rather structured conversation with executive directors and sometimes some of their supporting staff at each of the organizations in order to assess their existing capacity, including any data collection and analysis processes. A list of the questions used to guide this initial conversation is available in Appendix I.

Some of the larger and more well-established organizations had a lot to share, while some of the smaller organizations were doing very little, if anything, on data collection and analysis or even assessment of program goals. These initial conversations then created an opportunity for organizations' stakeholders to start identifying needs on their own; sometimes just answering my questions prompted an executive director or staff member to generate ideas on what they could be doing differently or better. These initial conversations also allowed me to suggest possible capacity-building tasks that could be feasibly completed during my sabbatical semester.

Data Sources

As I started engaging in the capacity-building activities sought by the organizations, I maintained detailed field notes. One document was simply a detailed list with a timeline of the tasks completed or the deliverables for each organization. In addition to being useful in the data analysis stage to see what tasks were completed and when, this document was also critical from a project management perspective. Working with seven different organizations at the same time, it was imperative that I was able to keep completed and upcoming tasks organized on a clear timeline.

I also kept detailed notes for every meeting held with the organizations, which were mostly held over Zoom. I captured direct quotations whenever possible, especially when organization stakeholders shared particular challenges, concerns, successes, or needs. Additionally, I continuously compiled a running document for email exchanges between myself and the organizations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted as the project was ongoing, but also at the conclusion of the sabbatical semester. As field notes were collected, I highlighted recurring themes across organizations, such as common challenges, successes, or needs. I also created a separate document to compile lists of common themes.

At the end of the semester, I also reread all documents (timeline list of tasks, field notes of meetings, and emails) in an effort to revisit the data with fresh eyes and see if any additional themes emerged that were not identified during the project.

Given the data and methods utilized, this project is best understood as an exploratory case study, offering preliminary insights into how individual faculty members can contribute to nonprofit capacity-building during a sabbatical. While the findings are not intended to be generalizable, they provide a foundation for future inquiry and more systematic investigation of these types of academic-practitioner partnerships.

Findings

Reflections on my compiled data and the overall experience can be organized into two main categories. First, I will outline examples of how academic partners can contribute to capacity building, particularly for organizations focused on issues related to the criminal legal system. Second, I will provide some of the common challenges that arose in relationship building with the organizations and their own internal obstacles.

Examples of Academic Contributions to Nonprofit Capacity Building

In many ways, this section represents a list of the most pressing needs or interests that organizations identified either at the start of our partnership or in conversations following the initial questions I asked (as included in Appendix I), as well as my responses to those needs.

Many of the organizational needs related to evaluation capacity building (ECB). ECB has been defined as "an intentional process to increase individual motivation, knowledge, and skills, and to enhance a group or organization's ability to conduct or use evaluation" (Labin et al., 2012, p. 308). A common first step in any type of ECB is to first develop a *logic model*; without a clear documentation of resources, activities, and outcomes, it can be challenging to know what exactly should be evaluated. However, some organizations did not feel like the time investment necessary to generate a logic model was a worthwhile endeavor given their other needs. For example, in initial conversations about what types of capacity building would be most productive to come out of our partnership, organization F's director shared that she was just "not thrilled with the logic model idea, unless there was a really simple way to do it. It just feels tedious." Organization E, whose leadership had never even heard of a logic model, was very eager for me to share the general concept, provide examples, and explain how it can be useful. But the group ultimately decided that they also had more pressing needs. Interestingly, both Organizations F and E indicated that the program staff all knew the organization's activities and outcomes, so it was unnecessary to go through the process of formally documenting everything in a logic model.

Organization D had already developed a logic model as part of a prior collaboration with a foundation, but interestingly, their board of directors had very little understanding of why a logic model is developed and how it can guide future evaluation work. As such, I was invited to deliver a presentation explaining the value of logic models so that future conversations could start to build towards evaluation work using the logic model already developed.

Ultimately, a bit of a compromise was reached with Organization F, who understandably perceived logic model creation to be a bit "tedious" for their complex prison education programming. Their staff shared that a one-page document that included all of the program *outcomes* for different stakeholders (students, prisons, universities, etc.) in both the short- and long-term would be more helpful than a full logic model. This could be used to communicate their complex programming more clearly to those not familiar with their work and also to help align their outcomes with priority funding areas for foundation grants they were hoping to pursue.

Several other organizations were not even equipped to collect *data on program activities*, let alone outcomes. Despite being in operation for decades, Organization E lacked any system for keeping track of participants who started or completed their program or the volunteers they relied upon to deliver the program. Considering that their participants are people currently incarcerated, they were unable to complete any electronic intake form. Organization E stored all the paper intake forms. However, they were never compiled into a database that would permit them to track aggregate data such as the number of participants enrolled versus completed or demographic information about their participants and volunteers. Working in collaboration with staff from Organization E to know what types of information would be most useful to be able to collect and then compile, I developed spreadsheets for participant and for volunteer tracking. These relatively simple spreadsheets have already been valuable in a few grant applications, which require aggregate data on the number of annual participants.

Organization C had some similar needs in that they collected paper records of who visited their community food bank, but then nothing was ever done to organize or compile those data. I thus created a spreadsheet to better facilitate tracking of food pantry visitors. The director explained that this would be helpful in getting a better grasp on how many single individuals benefit from their food pantry compared to families with children, as well as how many individuals impacted by the criminal legal system are served. Once again, having this data would be useful for targeting certain types of grant funding opportunities that focus on particular populations.

Our initial conversations about capacity needs also revealed that some funding or food donation opportunities were dependent upon the organization being able to demonstrate the quantity of food successfully distributed in the past. I worked with the director to identify existing online software programs to track quantities and types of food donated, but these programs were ultimately determined to be outside the existing program budget. As at least a temporary solution, I developed a spreadsheet with simple dropdown menus for the types, quantities, and sources of food distributed.

Organization D already had a fairly extensive online case management system in use, which included information on participants' prior legal system involvement, education and employment, housing status, substance use history, mental health challenges, family relationships, and more. Even though these data were electronic, unlike other organizations with only hard-copy paper records, all the years' worth of information collected was used solely to guide service delivery and referrals for individual clients. It had never been compiled or analyzed at the aggregate level to better understand their overall client population needs in order to inform programming or communicate to funders. I was thus able to conduct some basic data analyses to produce client profiles across their programs. We discussed how this information might be particularly valuable in grant applications; for example, if a funder wants to direct funding to organizations that address people with a history of mental health challenges, then Organization D is now equipped to communicate the percentage of their clients who report experiencing these challenges.

Some of the organizations were also interested in beginning to collect *data on program outcomes*, even if those data were predominantly based on participant self-reports. Organization E had previously used an exit survey, which essentially asked participants what they liked about the program and what they wished had been done differently. But in our initial conversations, program staff indicated that they wanted to capture measures that tapped into changes in participants' perceptions of their own skills and their anticipated behavior following release. I shared some measures validated in prior research that aligned with their program goals, and we then developed an intake survey and an exit survey using those existing measures. Knowing that it would also be program volunteers with access to the participants, I also developed a script for volunteers to use when administering the intake and exit surveys.

Similarly, Organization G, the only government agency included in this project, was hoping to better assess participant experiences in three of their restorative justice programs. As will be further discussed in the section on common challenges below, this organization had really important questions about how they could determine if their programs were "evidence-based." This gave us an opportunity to have a discussion about a range of options for measuring program effectiveness. Although we began sharing some ideas about how a more extensive program evaluation could track outcomes like recidivism, the key organization stakeholders agreed upon a first step that would assess participants' perceptions of the extent to which the restorative justice programs repaired harms caused by the crime.

Lastly, I was able to contribute to a few *miscellaneous tasks* as a result of my partnership with these organizations. In addition to miscellaneous assistance on grant applications or answering questions about the latest academic research available, perhaps the most personally rewarding task came in collaboration with Organization D. They expressed interest in changing some of the terminology commonly used in the field of prisoner reentry. I worked with a staff person who first generated this idea to draft a statement on behalf of the organization. We presented this statement to our local reentry coalition, and various coalition members have since adopted the terminology change. I was also able to use some of my connections to local criminal justice agencies to share the terminology statement and encourage them to adopt the recommended language as well.

Another miscellaneous task that I found to be very rewarding and hopefully impactful in the future was in collaboration with Organization B. This group was in the beginning stages of developing restorative justice responses for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families who were harmed by in-prison medical experiments. Drawing from my academic expertise in the area, I was able to outline ideas for what a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would entail. This project will require ongoing collaboration, but my outline at least gave the group a starting point for future planning.

Aside from these rewarding miscellaneous tasks, the most common ways I was able to donate my time to capacity building efforts with the organizations were definitely in the area of evaluation capacity building. Even the development of relatively simple spreadsheets to facilitate data collection and analysis, or basic participant perception surveys, seems to help nonprofits take important steps forward.

Common Challenges to Consider

Some of the themes that emerged from the analysis of field notes and email communications related to the partnership-building process between me and the organizations. It is worth noting that I had previously worked with these organizations in some capacity prior to undertaking the more in-depth research as part of my sabbatical. However, I still learned valuable lessons in further developing these partnerships.

One of the key lessons identified is the importance of *establishing clear timelines* at the very beginning of the project. Despite my communication that I was essentially doing this work pro bono because I believed in the missions of each organization, there was great variation in how quickly the organizations expected me to respond or produce a particular deliverable. My sense was that some of this was likely a product of different workplace cultures; some organizations seemed to function in a corporate culture in which email responses must be provided by the close of business day, while others were more tolerant of delays. Navigating how to balance the norms of academic communication with the norms of each organization eventually required clear stipulations about expected timelines for responses and tasks.

Interestingly, the one government agency was the only organization that requested a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Some issues related to timelines and communication expectations might have been worked out earlier if they had been included in an MOU with each of the organizations. However, there were several points in my field notes about *the value of the informal relationships* that I developed with organizational stakeholders. In several different contexts, it was the informal, almost friendship-like, relationships that enabled me to have some sensitive conversations about things like "how do you know what you're doing is actually working?" or "what happens if your participants don't agree with what you think they should be experiencing in the program?" Considering that an MOU can almost feel like a formal contract, there is definitely a balance to find between clearly setting expectations for things like timelines and also maintaining that informal relationship to facilitate some of the tougher conversations.

Another common challenge that arose was the ability to *locate existing program documents*, such as mission statements, curricula, program descriptions, intake forms, and exit interviews. For at least three nonprofits (Organizations C, E, and F), various documents were stored in different departments by different people. I underestimated the time it would take to simply compile existing program documents because they were not centrally stored. This not only creates challenges for an academic partner starting to learn about a nonprofit, but also for the nonprofit's internal succession planning. In retrospect, one capacity-building task that could have been valuable for me to facilitate with organizations would have been centralized data storage, particularly with an eye towards succession planning or staff turnover.

Relatedly, several organizations shared that key information was not documented anywhere, but *information existed only in the staff's minds*. This was a particular need identified by Organization A, which was interested in replicating its in-prison programming in other prisons where it did not currently have staff on site. Unfortunately, there was no facilitator or staff guide for delivering the programming, as it was primarily embedded in the knowledge of staff members who had already delivered the program numerous times. As one of the projects that will be extending beyond my sabbatical semester, I am continuing to collaborate with Organization A to observe their current staff's program delivery in order to develop a facilitator's manual that can be used by newly trained staff in other prisons.

Lastly, another recurring challenge was around *what types of data "count."* In evaluation capacity-building conversations, several organizations were unsure how to weigh the value of some types of data against others. For example, the director of Organization F explained that they collect lots of "anec-data" or stories about the impact of their program. However, not much that is more systematic or quantified. Similarly, Organization E had previously used an exit survey that simply asked open-ended questions about what participants liked about the program. Both of these organizations sought input on how to rank the value of these types of data when trying to measure program impact.

Similarly, Organization G's director wanted to know the criteria for a program to be considered "evidence based." This opened an important dialogue on whose distinction or classification of "evidence" matters. While there may be some scholars, practitioners, or policymakers who require a randomized controlled trial for a program to be deemed "evidence based," RCTs are not feasible for most programs, especially if they require multiple criminal justice agencies to track recidivism. Acknowledging and accepting this reality was perhaps a bit challenging for the organization, but through ongoing conversation, I was able to help them identify feasible outcomes that could be measured to internally refine programming and communicate externally about program benefits, even if they did not rise to the level of "evidence based."

Discussion

In sum, my sabbatical semester spent doing pro bono capacity-building work with nonprofits and a government agency revealed many options for how academics can partner with organizations to advance their missions and improve their programming. Having an external academic partner assist with data collection on program activities and outcomes provided an opportunity for organizations to better understand the work they are currently engaged in, make program improvements as needed, and more clearly communicate their work to potential funders.

Spending the semester engaged with nonprofits also gave me an opportunity to reflect on how and why other academics may want to engage in similar research. Perhaps the most selfish of reasons is that it can be easy for academics to get stuck in the ivory tower. While doing the theoretical work is certainly necessary, it can also be very rewarding to have some deeper experience on the ground, working alongside people who are directly serving individuals impacted by the criminal legal system. Even though I had already worked with many of these organizations in the past, my deeper collaborations this semester offered me a much clearer picture of the day-to-day challenges nonprofit organizations face. For any future projects working with nonprofit organizations, I will be better prepared to understand the organizational realities that may limit any capacity-building efforts.

At the same time, understanding these organizational realities also underscores the need for community-based organizations to get as much help as they can. Particularly for nonprofits working on issues of crime, justice, and criminal legal system entanglement, the scope of the problems they face is vast. Historical underinvestment and disinvestment in urban communities have resulted in high rates of concentrated disadvantage and violence (Johnson & Kane, 2018; Friedson & Sharkey, 2015; Peterson & Krivo, 2010). With nearly 2 million people currently incarcerated, nearly 80 million people with a criminal record, and an estimated 113 million people with an immediate family member with a history of incarceration (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024), the social and economic consequences of mass incarceration are far-reaching (DeFina & Hannon, 2013; Western & Pettit, 2010; Patillo, Weiman, & Western, 2004). Facing these daunting challenges, particularly in metropolitan environments, nonprofits and other organizations can benefit from even small academic contributions to capacity building.

While nonprofits attempting to tackle the overwhelming issues of crime, justice, and criminal legal system entanglement are certainly in need of assistance, nonprofit organizations doing work in other contexts are also deserving of assistance from academic partnerships. Particularly in the context of the harmful relationships universities have had with their communities historically (Keith, 2015; Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2005; White, 2008), academic support to community-based organizations is perhaps one strategy for beginning to repair some of those harms.

Importantly, these findings hold particular relevance for urban and metropolitan universities. Located in diverse cities with long-standing patterns of segregation, inequality, and over-policing, urban-serving institutions have both an opportunity and an obligation to build more reciprocal relationships with surrounding communities. Scholars have argued that metropolitan universities are uniquely positioned to foster transformational civic partnerships due to their proximity to complex social issues, their diverse student bodies, and their missions of public service (Harkavy & Hartley, 2012; O'Meara, 2008). In this context, the work described in this study aligns well with broader institutional goals related to equity, community engagement, and applied scholarship.

Campuses can encourage this kind of partnership-driven work in a number of ways: by expanding definitions of scholarship to include community-engaged research, by offering course releases or small internal grants for faculty pursuing community partnerships, and by building infrastructure—such as offices of community engagement—that can help initiate and sustain these collaborations. Creating intentional pathways for faculty to engage in capacity-building work—through sabbatical programs, public service fellowships, or formal collaborations with local agencies—signals institutional commitment and lowers the burden for individual scholars to initiate such work on their own.

However, a barrier to expanding this work remains in how it is recognized within traditional faculty evaluation systems. While some universities may include community-engaged scholarship and service-learning within review, promotion, and tenure (RPT) guidelines, this is not yet consistent or widespread. Much of the work involved in building community partnerships—relationship development, logistical coordination, navigating organizational politics—is not easily quantifiable and may be undervalued compared to more traditional research outputs. As Fitzgerald et al. (2012) argue, institutions committed to publicly engaged scholarship must revise RPT policies to explicitly recognize the rigor, relevance, and public impact of these efforts. Making space for engaged scholarship within RPT criteria would send a clear message to faculty that partnerships with nonprofits and government agencies are not only worthwhile but essential to the mission of metropolitan universities.

One avenue for future research to explore may be the perceptions of nonprofit stakeholders in these types of faculty partnerships. Anecdotally, I can share that from the perspective of the partners I worked with, the value of academic support was clear. Multiple stakeholders described the partnership as uniquely helpful in capacity building that they otherwise would not have had the resources to complete. While some organizations had previously hired consultants, they noted that academic collaboration was more focused on mutual learning and capacity-building rather than deliverables alone. These sentiments are echoed in existing scholarship on participatory action research and community-engaged scholarship, which highlight how equitable partnerships can improve not only data quality but also organizational learning and sustainability (Strand et al., 2003). Future research could build on this prior work to more rigorously examine nonprofit partners' perceptions of their collaboration with individual faculty members.

Conclusion

The findings from this semester-long research sabbatical highlight the significant potential for individual faculty members to contribute meaningfully to capacity-building efforts in partnership with nonprofits and other community-based organizations. As a facilitator for helping organizations identify their capacity-building goals, academics can offer assistance with data collection and analysis that can enhance the operational capabilities of these organizations. However, these collaborations also present challenges, such as aligning goals, managing expectations, and navigating different organizational cultures. Addressing these challenges requires clear communication, mutual respect, and a commitment to shared objectives. By contextualizing these experiences within the broader literature on academic-nonprofit collaborations, this study highlights the importance of fostering these partnerships and provides a framework for overcoming common obstacles. Ultimately, strengthening these connections can lead to more effective and sustainable community-based initiatives, benefiting both academics and nonprofit organizations.

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Appendix I
Initial Questions for Organizations

Current Data Practices:

1. How is data currently collected, managed, and stored within your organization?
2. What types of data do you currently collect, and for what purposes?
3. Are there any existing data collection tools or systems in place?

Program Objectives and Outcomes:

4. What are the primary objectives and goals of your programs?
5. How do you define success for your programs? What outcomes are you trying to achieve?
6. What do you see as the main program components that drive outcomes? Do you have or have you ever drafted a program logic model?

Challenges:

7. What challenges or obstacles do you currently face in terms of data collection and program evaluation?
8. Are there any specific areas where you feel your current strategies are lacking?

Capacity and Resources:

9. What resources (human, financial, technological) are currently available for data collection and evaluation efforts?
10. Are there any limitations or constraints that might impact the implementation of improved strategies?

Data Privacy and Ethics:

11. How do you currently address issues related to data privacy and ethics in your organization?
12. Are there any specific concerns or considerations related to handling sensitive data?

Stakeholder Involvement:

13. Who are the key stakeholders in your organization, and how are they involved in data collection and program evaluation (if at all)?
14. Do you intend to use new data collection or program evaluation strategies to help strengthen existing ties with stakeholders and/or secure new stakeholders?

Reporting and Communication:

15. How do you currently communicate and share outcomes / program success with internal and external stakeholders?

16. What types of reports or insights are most valuable to your organization?

Training and Capacity Building:

17. What level of expertise and training do your current staff have in data collection and program evaluation?
18. Are there opportunities for capacity building within your organization?

Long-Term Goals:

19. What are your organization's long-term goals, and how do you see improved data strategies contributing to these goals (i.e., new funding opportunities)?
20. Are there any specific milestones or targets you aim to achieve through enhanced data practices?

