

Data Science for Social Impact: Roundtable Discussions 1 and 2 Summary Report

May 2021

Overview

Data Science for Social Impact (DSSI) is an initiative that builds data capacity and collaboration among St. Louis social sector organizations working to increase impact *for* and *with* the communities they serve. As part of this initiative, the Social Policy Institute at Washington University in St. Louis (SPI) is working to develop a set of free, accessible training and programming opportunities tailored to the priorities and needs of social sector organizations seeking to build capacity in these areas. To inform this effort, SPI is hosting a series of public roundtable discussions in partnership with the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, data.org, and the St. Louis Regional Data Alliance in 2021.

The first two roundtable discussions took place on April 27 and May 7, 2021 with three more planned for late 2021. Each gathering included a project introduction alongside short partner presentations about the emerging field of data science for social impact. Breakout sessions solicited feedback from participants to inform the planning, development and design of future offerings ([video recording available here](#)).

Participants

The first two roundtable discussions attracted a total of **238 registrants** representing **129 organizations**; 134 unique attendees participated in the discussion and all registrants received the recording after the event.

During each roundtable, participants were asked about their positions within their organizations. A wide range of positions were represented: CEO; Data Analyst; Director; Program Manager; Community Health Educator; Business Information Analyst; Grants Manager; Software Engineer; Client Services Director, and more.

Which best describes your current role in relation to data?	
Data informs my work but is NOT my primary focus.	49 %
Working with data is my primary role.	31 %
I create or supply data for others in the organization.	14 %
I currently have little or no interaction with data.	6 %

These responses support an approach to building data capacity broadly across organizations, focusing on a wide range of technical and non-technical skills and competencies.

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Feedback and Emerging Themes

The roundtable discussions revealed both challenges facing social sector organizations and opportunities for growth and capacity building. The areas that generated the most interest and discussion include basic data tools and trainings, data sharing and collaboration, and communication and translation around data. Below are themes that emerged through participant engagement.

Data Challenges

When attendees registered, they were asked, “*What is an example of a success or barrier your organization has faced using data to increase impact?*” Based on responses, we facilitated a follow-up poll during the roundtable discussion to see which themes most resonated.

Which of these challenges have you encountered working with data in your organization? Check all that apply.	
Lack of consistency of data fields across sources or departments.	63%
Limited data analysis capacity.	61%
Uncertainty about what to measure/ collect.	52%
Challenges sharing data across organizations or jurisdictions.	49%
Not enough data disaggregated by race/ ethnicity.	43%

Additionally, participants reported building data strategies around funder categories and requests, regardless of how well these align with their own organizational goals or ability to increase the impact of their programs. A perceived disconnect was identified between funder requests and calls for proposals and the data most relevant to furthering organizations’ missions. Participants expressed interest in finding ways to address this challenge.

Suggested Resources/Tools

The breakout sessions at each roundtable discussion were facilitated by the Social Policy Institute and St. Louis Regional Data Alliance. Each breakout first asked participants, “*What resources/tools would help you and/or your organization more effectively mobilize data to increase impact?*”

1) Social sector organizations seek trainings, resources and tools that will help them build data capacity for staff at various levels of the organization. Specific areas mentioned include:

- trainings to increase basic data capacity and how to improve quality assurance in data collection
- directory of and access to researchers, consultants and expert office hours
- curated resource list of free, accessible tools and platforms

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“We could use basic data training, even just how to use spreadsheets consistently across departments so that those of us who are utilizing data know we are getting what we need and people who are not used to working with data know how to provide it.”

- Project Coordinator for a St. Louis nonprofit

“It would be helpful to have [a directory of] people that I can talk to and ask questions of or a place to go to fill in gaps in my own knowledge, because I’m self-taught... and sometimes I know what I don’t know and sometimes I don’t know what I don’t know. But it would be good to have a sense of what kinds of areas of knowledge people have that I might be able to draw upon through peer-to-peer or a consultancy set-up or whatever.”

- Program Director for a St. Louis health advocacy organization

2) Social sector organizations need access to visualization tools and translation skills to better communicate about impact. Discussions on this topic focused on the need for free and accessible tools and skills for visualizing data, as well as building skills and strategies for using data for storytelling. Specific ideas and areas for growth mentioned include:

- data visualization tools that are free and user-friendly
- training on how to tell compelling stories with data and how to create materials that effectively communicate information to different audiences (such as policymakers and funders)
- strategies for integrating qualitative and quantitative data

“The connection of the data and the telling of stories and visualization, that’s a skillset that’s often not available for nonprofits... Most of the nonprofits I work with are good at telling their story. Connecting them and being able to visualize them and communicate [to funders and other audiences] is a different skillset.”

- St. Louis-based nonprofit professional/consultant

“Qualitative data is still really important data... We try to center the voices of people impacted...so I often think of how people’s lived experiences and their stories are valuable data points.”

- Program Director for a St. Louis nonprofit

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3) Social sector organizations want to increase communication about data across roles, from data entry and data analysis to senior management and leadership. Discussions focused on needing better communication about data *within* organizations to foster shared understanding of strategy and infrastructure. Specific areas for growth mentioned include:

- training for frontline staff how to use electronic data platforms
- building organizational appreciation for the value of data
- ensuring all levels of the organization understand the continuous thread of data from client to outcomes and funder reporting

“People might just think they’re doing basic data input but if they understand how critical that is to the success of the organization, it makes them even feel better about what they’re doing every day.”

- Social Responsibility Executive at a St. Louis lending organization

“I pretty much live and eat and breathe data all day long, whether it’s to report out to funders or to drive our programs in certain directions. Probably our biggest issue really is just consistency between departments, and while I might live and breathe data, trying to help the rest of the organization understand the data and how it drives our programming forward.”

- Data Coordinator for St. Louis-based nonprofit

4) Social sector organizations want to work together and need guidance how to share data while maintaining robust standards and privacy protections. Specific areas for growth include:

- building partnerships among organizations doing the same types of work
- connecting smaller organizations with more resourced and data experienced partners
- increased knowledge of best practices for data sharing across nonprofits, especially with health and government agencies with high privacy concerns
- data sharing agreements that meet privacy standards
- legal resources to facilitate partnerships
- common datasets across jurisdictions such as the county and city

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“Our organization is part direct service provider, part intermediary. As an intermediary it helps to have data sharing agreements with systems like health systems, educational systems so that we can determine interventions for families. This is a challenge when it comes to hospitals, school systems, or police departments ... because the partner isn’t always aware of what could potentially be shared based on privacy standards like FERPA and HIPA. So best practices or templates of what others have been able to do to share data would be extremely helpful.”

- Director of a St. Louis-based nonprofit

“In violence prevention...the city reports statistics separately from the county... We have a project [combining data from different sources] but we can’t do it in the county because we can’t get information from the 50+ police departments [that] have huge variation in their capacity to even keep their own data, much less publicize that data.”

- Project Manager for a St. Louis-based nonprofit

Curriculum and Training Focus Areas

During roundtable breakouts, participants provided feedback on potential focus areas and priorities for resource and training development. Several priority areas emerged, as outlined below (see Appendix for a full list of sub-topics).

- data informed decision-making and implementation
- translation and dissemination for policy
- ethical data practices and privacy protections
- public and open data
- effective data partnerships
- telling your story with data
- bridging nonprofit and data science expertise

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Strategy & Leadership	Monitoring & Evaluation	Infrastructure: Building & Maintaining	Collaboration & Exchange	Communication & Translation
Advancing Data Equity for Impact				
Organizational culture ★ 4 4 ✓	Problem identification ★ 0 3 ✓	Organizational culture ★ 3 2 ✓	Public & open data ★ 11 1 ✓	Telling your story with data ★ 8 2 ✓
Adaptive leadership ★ 3 1 ✓	Data collection & analysis ★ 5 3 ✓	Hiring & upskilling ★ 2 6 ✓	Ethnical data practices & privacy protections ★ 6 7 ✓	Bridging nonprofits and data science expertise (bilingualism) ★ 6 3 ✓
Systems thinking & ecosystem mapping ★ 4 3 ✓	Data informed decision-making & implementation ★ 10 3 ✓	Data lifecycle management & sustainability ★ 4 2 ✓	Effective data partnerships ★ 7 4 ✓	Translation & dissemination for policy ★ 12 3 ✓
11 19 8	15 27 12	9 19 10	24 36 12	26 34 8

Participants placed stars and checkmarks on the areas that most resonated with them, with stars indicating the highest interest. Total engagements (stars and checkmarks combined) across the five main content areas:

- collaboration and exchange (36)
- communication and translation (34)
- monitoring and evaluation (27)
- infrastructure (19)
- strategy and leadership (19)

Feedback demonstrates notable participant interest in thinking big picture around how data is used within an organization. Notably, six of the seven priorities identified above correspond to the broader thematic areas that emerged through the roundtable discussions: collaboration & exchange and communication & translation. While participants indicated broad interests, the input helped to identify good strategic starting places to focus material and resource development.

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Next Steps

While this participant feedback is invaluable, it represents one early piece of a larger strategy for St. Louis social sector feedback and input into future DSSI offerings. Building on roundtable participant feedback, the Social Policy Institute anticipates advancing a set of activities in 2021, including:

- formation of a DSSI advisory committee
- two public-facing virtual events (an expansion of a student-focused data and the social sector series)
- Three more roundtable discussions on specific topics and focus areas identified through participant and stakeholder feedback

These activities will inform the development of the Data Science for Social Impact trainings and resources, which will launch in 2022. This will include monthly learning events, a Data Science for Social Impact summit, and an online learning space where participants can continue to utilize expanded events and resources. We look forward to designing these events and resources in collaboration with our partners in ways and on topics that most meaningful for participants.

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Appendix:

Ranking of focus areas based on roundtable feedback

Sub-Section	✓	★	Total	Section Header
Data Informed Decision-making & Implementation	6	10	16	Monitoring & Evaluation
Translation & Dissemination for Policy	3	12	15	Communication & Translation
Ethical Data Practices & Privacy Protections	7	6	13	Collaboration & Exchange
Public & Open Data	1	11	12	Collaboration & Exchange
Effective Data Partnerships	4	7	11	Collaboration & Exchange
Telling Your Story with Data	2	8	10	Communication & Translation
Bridging Non-profit & Data Science Expertise (Bilingualism)	3	6	9	Communication & Translation
Organizational Culture	4	4	8	Strategy & Leadership
Data Collection & Analysis	3	5	8	Monitoring & Evaluation
Hiring & Upskilling	6	2	8	Infrastructure: Building & Maintaining
Systems Thinking & Ecosystem Mapping	3	4	7	Strategy & Leadership
Data Lifecycle Management & Sustainability	2	4	6	Infrastructure: Building & Maintaining
Organizational Needs & Assets	2	3	5	Infrastructure: Building & Maintaining
Adaptive Leadership	1	3	4	Strategy & Leadership
Problem Identification	3	0	3	Monitoring & Evaluation

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