Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP)

Evaluation 2017-2019
What have we learned?

Background

Evaluation

CUP is a unique collaboration between community agencies, researchers, government, and funders in Edmonton and across Alberta. These partners are committed to improving the wellbeing of children, youth, and families by creating and mobilizing evidence and knowledge to impact programs and policies.

CUP's vision is one of **engaged communities[1] that support the well-being of children, youth, and families**. We bring our vision to life by **nurturing environments where evidence[2] contributes to effective practices and policies.**

In our work, we value: (1) informed decision-making, (2) diversity of knowledge, (3) engaged research, (4) respectful partnerships, and (5) a culture of learning.

CUP had three **strategic priority areas** of work from 2016 to 2019:

- Research and evaluation in early childhood development.
- Public policy analysis and development.
- Research and evaluation in poverty.

Purpose and Scope

CUP uses an engaged research approach, accomplishing its work through engagement, leadership, knowledge mobilization, research and evaluation, and capacity building. Our goal is that through this type of work our partners will be able to access quality evidence, use it effectively and make informed decisions about practices, programs and policies. CUP's mission is:

To nurture environments where evidence is used effectively to develop practices, programs, and policies that support the healthy development of children, youth and families.

In 2017, CUP developed an evaluation plan to understand the factors that influence their ability to accomplish our mission.

[1] Communities are defined as distinct groups of people who share common characteristics, connections, values and/or interests which may include geographical location, social norms, cultural backgrounds, or other values or ideas that distinguish them from the larger society.
[2] Evidence is defined as different forms of knowledge derived from research, practice and experience.

CUP's theory of change is based on the assumption that the better use of evidence leads to better decision-making and more effective delivery of services, which, in turn, promotes better wellbeing for children, youth, families, and communities. This is our core mission.

CUP understands its work influences three main pathways to evidence-informed practice, programs and policy (Figure 1):

- **Access to evidence**: CUP seeks to increase the availability, relevance, and utility of evidence about children, youth, and families for our partners;
- **Ability to use the evidence**: CUP builds the capacity of partners to use and leverage evidence to inform practice, programs and policies;
- **Organizational culture**: CUP seeks to nurture the culture of organizations so leaders and staff see value in the use of evidence in decision-making and direct service delivery.

CUP's evaluation focuses on understanding how we are achieving progress in these three pathways including the impacts of our collaborations at the individual, organizational and program/policy levels. It also explores factors that enable and/or impede our ability to accomplish our mission such as the scale of engagement and quality of our partnerships.

Figure 1: CUP's Theory of Change
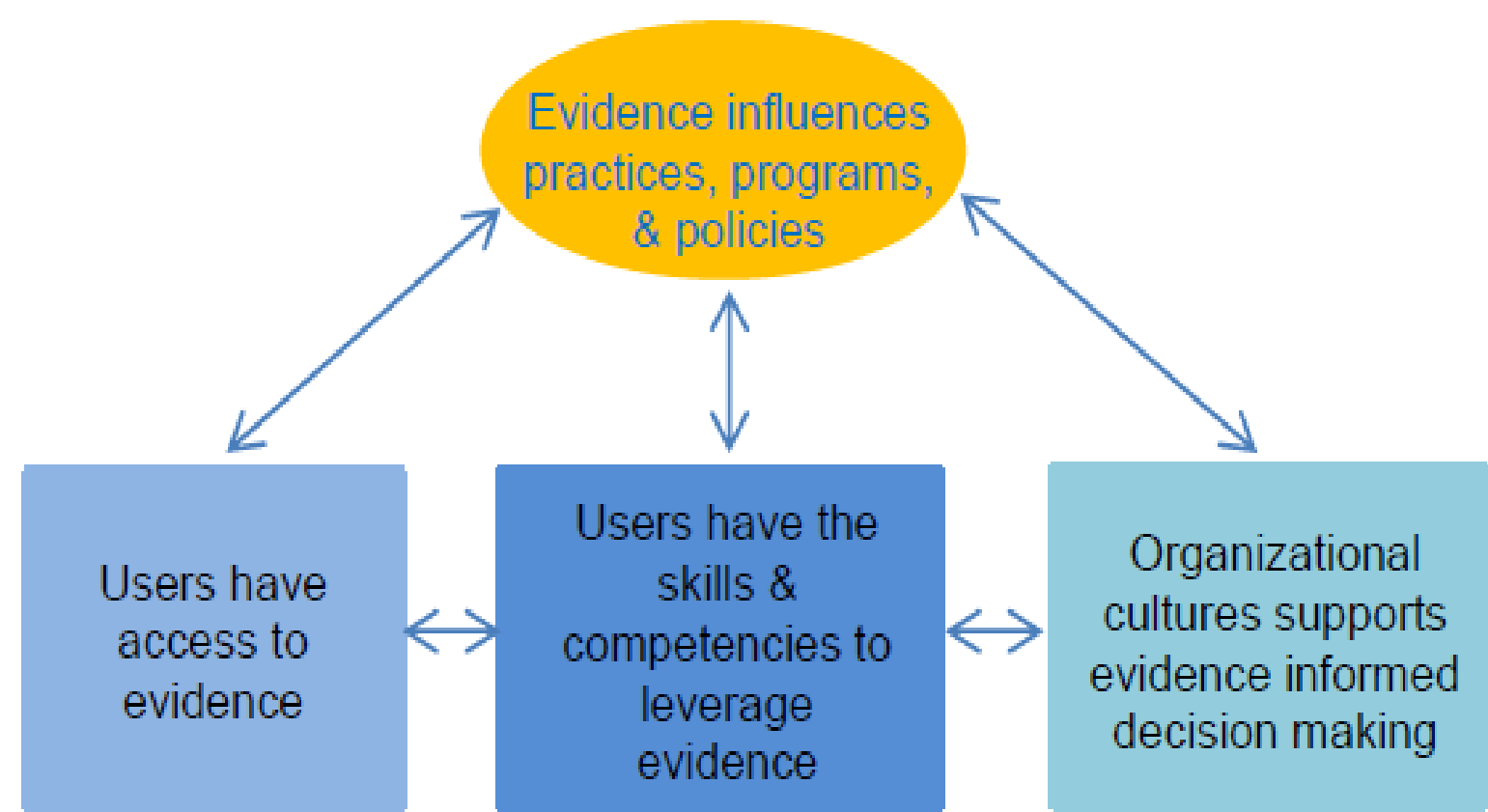
Approach

The evaluation is formative and supports ongoing improvement and implementation of learnings. Regular data collection, analysis, and feedback provides points of reflection and dialogue for CUP's faculty, staff, students and partners. The evaluation is developmental in nature, evolving as it unfolds. Both outcome and process elements are incorporated. Findings are used to inform future organizational development and improvement and also to demonstrate effectiveness to current and potential funders.

Overarching Evaluation Question:

How is CUP achieving its mission of nurturing environments where evidence contributes to effective practices, programs and policies in relation to the healthy development of children, families and communities?

Methods of Data Collection

A variety of data collection tools have been used over time to gather the perspectives of staff, partners and steering committee members. Current methods include:

1. *CUP Project Database*
CUP project teams (staff and students) complete this annual questionnaire which provides data to contextualize the project scope and scale, partners, funding, student involvement, etc.

2. *Project Partner Survey*
This annual survey allows project partners a way of providing feedback on the quality of engagement, partnerships, and the impact of CUP's work on their evidence informed decision making.

3. *CUP Steering Committee Reflections*
Introduced in 2019, this method gathers feedback from Steering Committee members to explore what they do differently in their work based on their experiences with the CUP Steering Committee and how this has shifted the way they think about their work and organization.

4. *Follow-up Partner Interviews (post project)*
Interviews with project partners occur at least 3 years after project completion. The interviews provide insight into whether and how collaboration with CUP influences changes in practice, programs and/or policies over time, examples of the long term impact, and increase our understanding of the enablers and barriers in influencing practice, programs and policies.

Interviews with partners from three completed CUP projects were conducted in the fall of 2019. Analysis is underway.

Embedding Process into Practice
Over three years of the evaluation, two methods shifted from evaluation methods into ongoing practice:

1. Project team reflective discussions
2. Partner conversations

Since October 2019, all project teams have an intentional conversation with their partners about their partnership and project to understand the nature and quality of partnerships, explore how projects are progressing and identify areas for improvement. Outcomes from these conversations are used to improve communications with partners, streamline working relationships, or develop innovative solutions to challenges.

"Going forwards, I will always be reinforcing the need to put funding into evaluation."
Partner reflection

"One impact we think this project is starting to have on partner's practice is that their views are starting to shift when it comes to the purpose and complexity of evaluation (e.g., more understanding of what is feasible or not in evaluations; purpose of conducting evaluations)."
CUP project team reflection
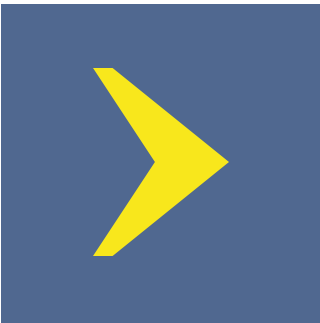
The Scale of Engagement

Partner & Project Engagement

In trying to understand our overarching research question, it is important to consider WHO we are working with as well as WHAT work we are engaged in.

Over the three years of the evaluation, CUP collaborated on **35 community-based research and evaluation projects** that vary in scope and scale. The number of active projects we are engaged in increased year-on-year (Figure 2). Many projects are longer term and unfold over several years. For example, 8 of the active projects in 2019 were active for 3 or more years. There are also new projects that CUP takes on each year; in 2019, 36% (8/22) of the projects were new projects.

Figure 2: Number of CUP Projects (2017-2019)

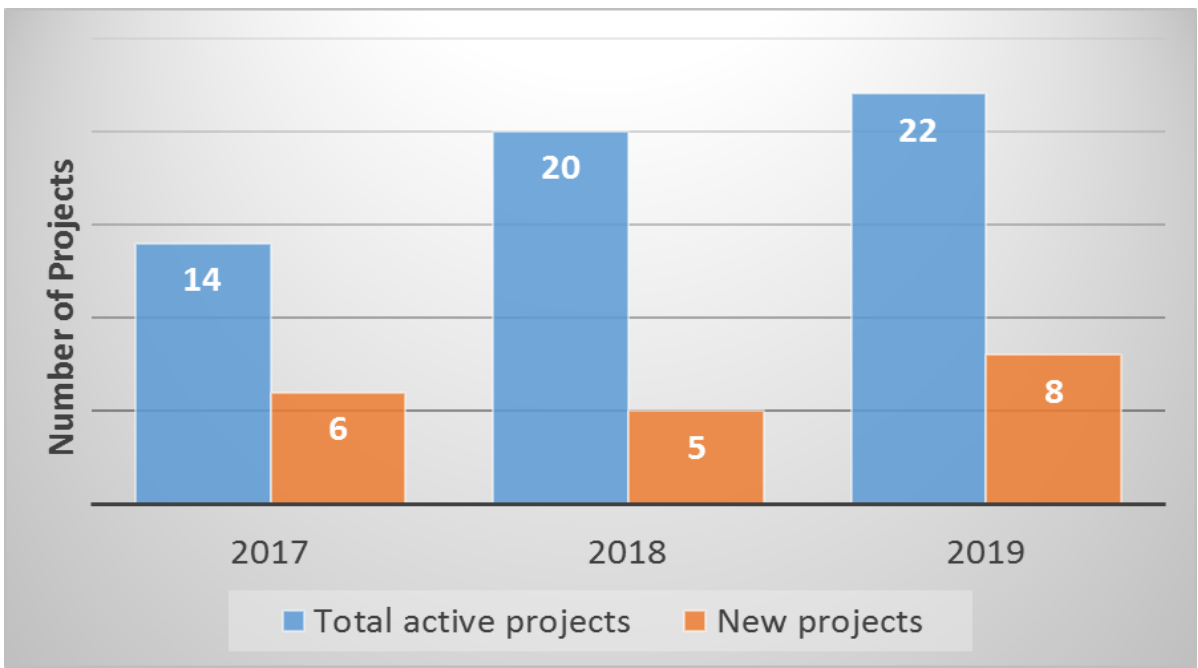CUP collaborated with **87 partner organizations over the three-year period**, the majority of these were local organizations (68%). Thirty-eight percent of these organizations collaborated with CUP over the full three years, suggesting a longevity to CUP's collaborations. It is worth noting that the evaluation captured the number of organizations and not individual partners. We are normally involved with a minimum of two individuals from a given organization, therefore the magnitude of CUP's engagement is even broader than reflected in these numbers.

Student Engagement

Engaging students in CUP's research partnerships provides an important form of research and evaluation capacity for partners as well as a rich learning environment for students. These student learning opportunities build the skill sets (e.g., engagement, community based research & evaluation, etc.) of the next generation of sector leaders.

CUP supports graduate students from a number of faculties across the university (see Table 1). A total of 30 graduate students from seven faculties were provided with research and evaluation opportunities in the past three years. CUP attempts to engage students over a longer term in order to provide consistent capacity for partners and a more realistic experience for students. In the past three years, 20 students (67%) were involved with CUP for 2 or more years and 4 students (13%) were involved

consistently over the three years.

Table 1: UofA Student's Home Faculties

1. Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences
- Human Ecology
- Agriculture, Food & Nutritional Sciences
2. Education
- School and Clinical Child Psychology
3. Extension
4. Medicine and Dentistry
5. Nursing
6. Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences
7. School of Public Health

Students brought **9,200 hours in research and evaluation capacity to CUP projects and community partners** over the three years. Student hours gradually increased year-on-year; from 2700 hours in 2017, 3000 in 2018 and 3500 in 2019. However, the number of graduate students working on projects decreased in 2019 (12 in 2019, 24 in 2018 and18 students in 2017). This suggests that CUP is keeping students for longer and presumably providing enhanced real-life research and evaluation experience and unique opportunities to translate theory into practice. We are currently building a systematic method for capturing student perspectives to include in our evaluation. Student experiences are captured from time to time. The quote below demonstrates how students benefit from increased capacity to conduct community-based research.

"My experiences with CUP have enabled me to better understand the process of engaging collaboratively in CBR and CBE. I have a greater awareness of and respect for building relationships with community partners, co-creating research and evaluation plans, and producing reports/ frameworks that are usable for community organizations."

PhD Student, Educational Psychology

Our Partners' Perspectives

In order to understand the impact of our engagements on our partners' access and use of evidence in decison making, it is important to hear directly from them. We gather their perspectives through our **annual partner survey**. We have monitored the response rate of the partner survey over the past three years and have worked to refine target partners for survey distribution. The response rate has ranged

from 63% (29/46) in 2017 to 45% (26/58) in 2019. Over the years, we have refined survey distribution to target partners who are closely involved in CUP projects and the collaboration with CUP.
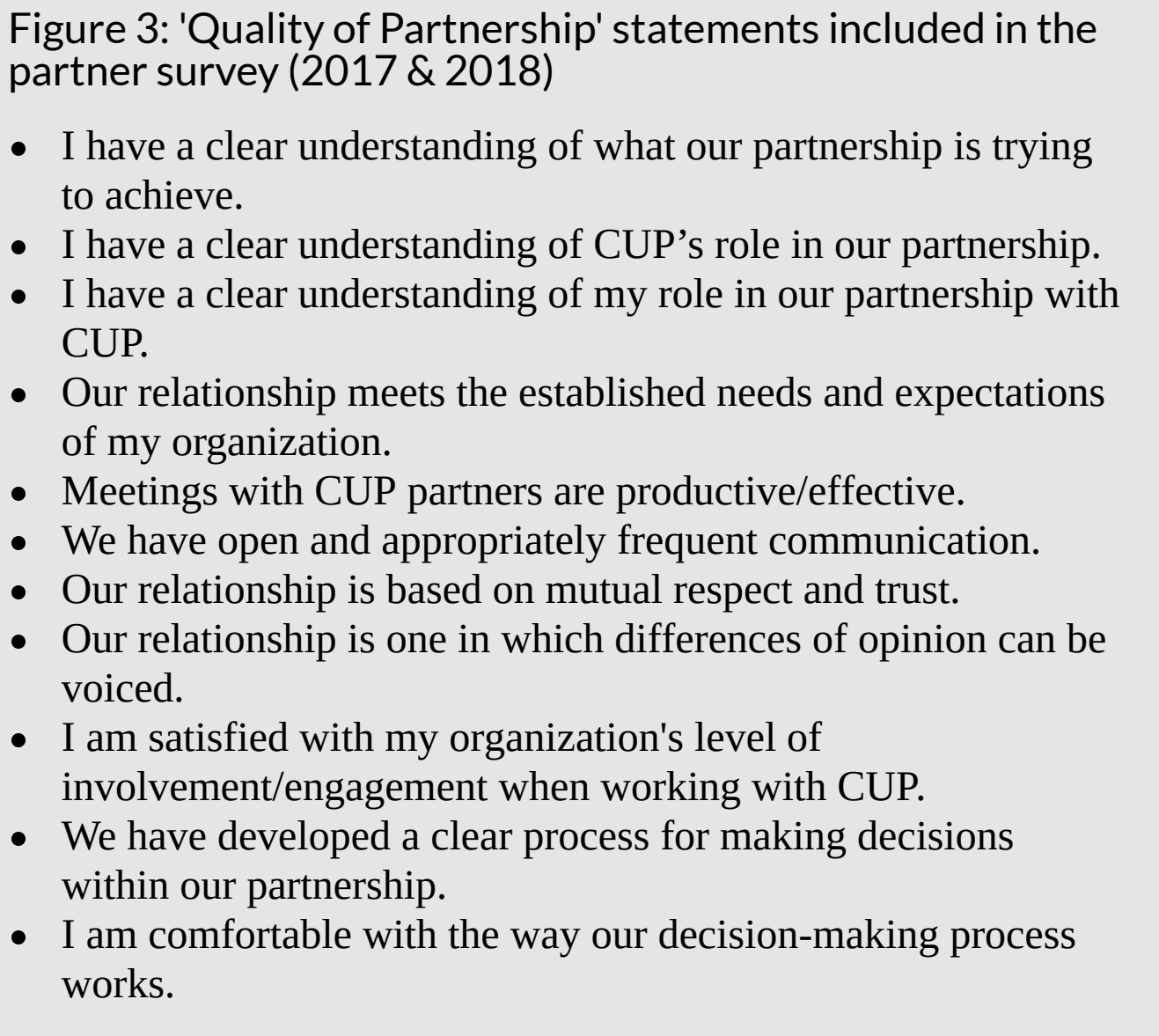
Year over year, the majority of survey respondents are from community organizations: 39% (11/28) in 2018 to 59% (17/29) in 2019. The majority of these respondents were executive directors and program managers.

Quality of Engagement

CUP reflects on its quality of engagement directly through its partnerships. Applying principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) is integral in quality engagement which underpins CUP's work. CBPR is a partnership approach to research that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and academic researchers in all aspects of the research process.

Building and maintaining equitable, collaborative partnerships between the university and communities is the foundation to CUP's theory of change and consequently an important area of exploration in the evaluation.

In the partner survey, respondents identified CUP's strength in developing high quality partnerships. Over the three years of the evaluation, we have adapted the questions we ask about the 'quality of partnership' so direct year over year comparisons are not possible. In 2017 and 2018, partners rated their level of agreement with various statements that depicted aspects of positive partnerships (Figure 3).

Figure 3: 'Quality of Partnership' statements included in the partner survey (2017 & 2018)

- I have a clear understanding of what our partnership is trying to achieve.
- I have a clear understanding of CUP's role in our partnership.
- I have a clear understanding of my role in our partnership with CUP.
- Our relationship meets the established needs and expectations of my organization.
- Meetings with CUP partners are productive/effective.
- We have open and appropriately frequent communication.
- Our relationship is based on mutual respect and trust.
- Our relationship is one in which differences of opinion can be voiced.
- I am satisfied with my organization's level of involvement/engagement when working with CUP.
- We have developed a clear process for making decisions within our partnership.
- I am comfortable with the way our decision-making process works.

In 2019, partners described two things that worked particularly well in their partnership with CUP: (a) the positive attributes of CUP staff and students including being professional, flexible, friendly, ethical and responsive, and (b) the effective and open communication within their partnership with CUP. These findings were corroborated during CUP's reflective discussions with partners.

> *"CUP representatives have been informed, collaborative and helpful. They bring a level of expertise to our partnership and capacity that we don't have…..."*

Partnership Improvement

The partner survey also asked respondents about what barriers they encountered in their partnership with CUP, or how the partnership could be improved. The majority of comments year over year suggest that partners are satisfied with their partnerships. However, **each year some partners suggested improvements to sharing of research/evaluation findings** including:
(a) hosting events to share evaluation findings with staff within partner organizations, (b) ensuring reports of research findings meet the individual needs of funders and (c) focusing more on demonstrating impact.

> *"Reports should be more individualized to meet funder's needs and answer their questions."*

In response to partners' comments, CUP recruited a **Communiy Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator** in 2018 so every CUP project and partnership has access to the supports needed to discuss emergent learnings, share them and apply them directly into practice or policy.

Other suggestions for improvement we heard across the years include:

- More opportunities/capacity to collaborate with CUP.
- Ensure CUP is a collaborator with the community, not a leader.
- Complexity of the work (rather than the partnership itself) is a barrier.
- Lack of understanding about research/evaluation within partner's organizations.
- Project management improvements (i.e. timelines and consistency in staff).
- Greater understanding of political and social context.

Partners' Overall Experience

In each of the three years, the **majority of project partners reported a high level of satisfaction with their overall experience of collaborating with CUP**. Furthermore, it appears that their level of satisfaction increased over the three years, as the percentage who rated their experience as '5' (the highest level) increased from 62% in 2017 to 85% in 2019.

Exploring Our Impact

Adding a Policy Emphasis

With the development of CUP's 2016-2019 strategic plan, we added the public policy analysis and development priority to CUP's work. This new priority area meant CUP would enhance the capacity of its staff and students to engage in policy discussions within individual projects. CUP would build purposeful policy discussions into partner discussions from the beginning of a project through to its completion. CUP would assess ways the emerging learning from a project or a group of projects could impact forms of policy. As previously mentioned, CUP hired a Community Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator who would provide all CUP teams with knowledge mobilization support.

Over the past three years, **the proportion of projects engaged in or contributing to 'policy' increased** from 36% (5/14) in 2017 to 73% (16/22) in 2019. As CUP staff and student's understanding of policy impact has grown over the past three years, we have adapted questions in the project database to better capture this information.

In 2017, our project database inquiries were focused on 'public policy'. CUP continued to be more purposeful in partner policy discussions and over time our understanding of policy impact expanded to include organizational policy shifts. In 2019, based on this new understanding of policy impact, CUP staff were asked to identify 'ways that projects have been discussing, or acting on, policy-related issues in the past year'. Table 2 identifies the points of inquiry used in 2019 to gauge how project teams were engaging in policy related discussions with their partners.

Table 2: Ways projects have been discussing, or acting on, policy-related issues in the past year

|	Number of projects	%
Not at all	2	8
Talking about policy-related issues within our CUP project team	5	21
Talking about policy-related issues with our project partners	13	54
Talking about policy-related issues outside of the CUP project team & partners	4	17
Producing written documents meant to inform or influence policy development and decisions	2	8
Other	4	17

Impacts on Individual Capacity

CUP's evaluation is assessing how we are achieving our mission of evidence informed change through our direct support and development of our partners' **individual capacity to access and use evidence, and their organizational culture that values evidence**.

Our partner survey is the best method of assessing these forms of change. Some limitations to the data are: (1) the questions about impacts on individual capacity changed over the three years, so the ability to look at trends across time was limited, and (2) the change in sample make-up in 2019 and small sample sizes limit our current ability to fully interpret these findings.

It is possible though, to compare 2018 and 2019 responses regarding the extent that the collaboration with CUP had improved partners' capacity in two areas: (1) *access* to evidence needed to make decisions and (2) understanding of how to *use* evidence to make decisions. A key finding is that **partners' reported level of improvement in their access to evidence increased in 2019**. 73% of partners reported moderate or considerable improvement in this area in 2019, compared to 65% in 2018. Moreover, the percentage reporting *considerable* improvement increased quite substantially from 29% to 59% (Figure 4). Contrary to this, the percentage who reported moderate or considerable improvement in their understanding of how to use evidence reduced from 68% in 2018 to 58% in 2019.

Figure 4: Partners' reported level of improvement in their access to evidence needed to make decisions
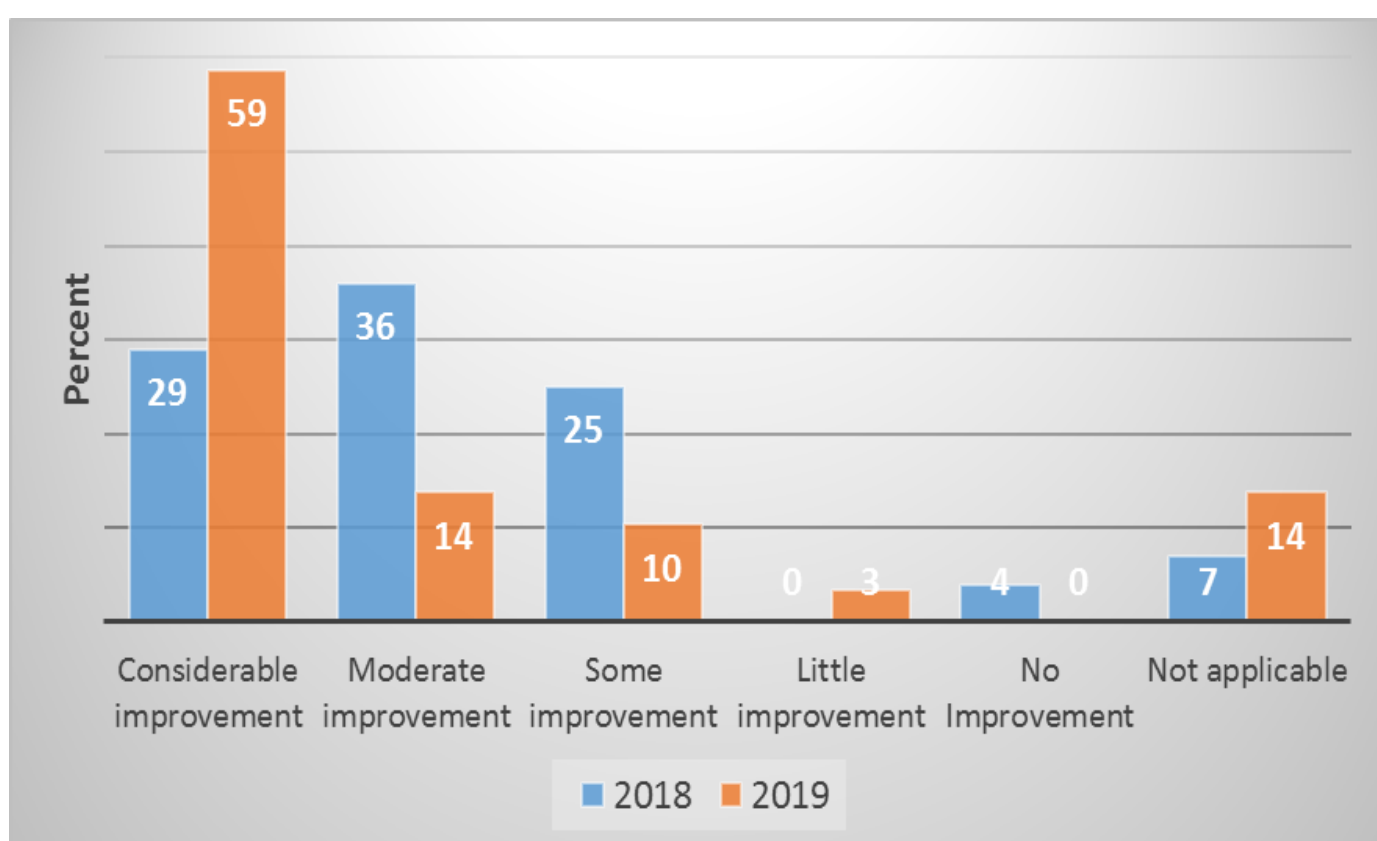
Qualitative data regarding impacts on individual capacity can be grouped into three themes (2018 and 2019):

1. Increased research/evaluation capacity:
Partners described that they now place higher value on the importance of evaluation, they have increased knowledge and confidence in implementing community-based research/evaluation, and they have an increased ability to use research and evaluation findings to inform their work.

In addition, some partners described how they were now more open to new approaches and ways of working.

> *"I understand the evaluation process more clearly. Also understand the value of research and how we can apply it to our work."*

2. Knowledge mobilization:
Partners expressed how their collaboration with CUP supported knowledge mobilization. Partners felt more equipped and legitimized in 'telling the story' of their project and in sharing knowledge and insights. This finding was most prominent in 2019.

> *"[Collaborating with CUP] made me more aware of how data could be used to tell the story of our work."*

3. Connections and networks:
Building connections/networks seems to be a particular strength of CUP that partners consistently recognized. The connections and relationships CUP has with community partners, including the ability to connect partners with others was highlighted. Furthermore, in 2017, partners reported the greatest impact on their individual capacity in the area of 'networks and relationships with stakeholders'.

> *"We have connections to key stakeholders in the city that we otherwise would not have access to."*
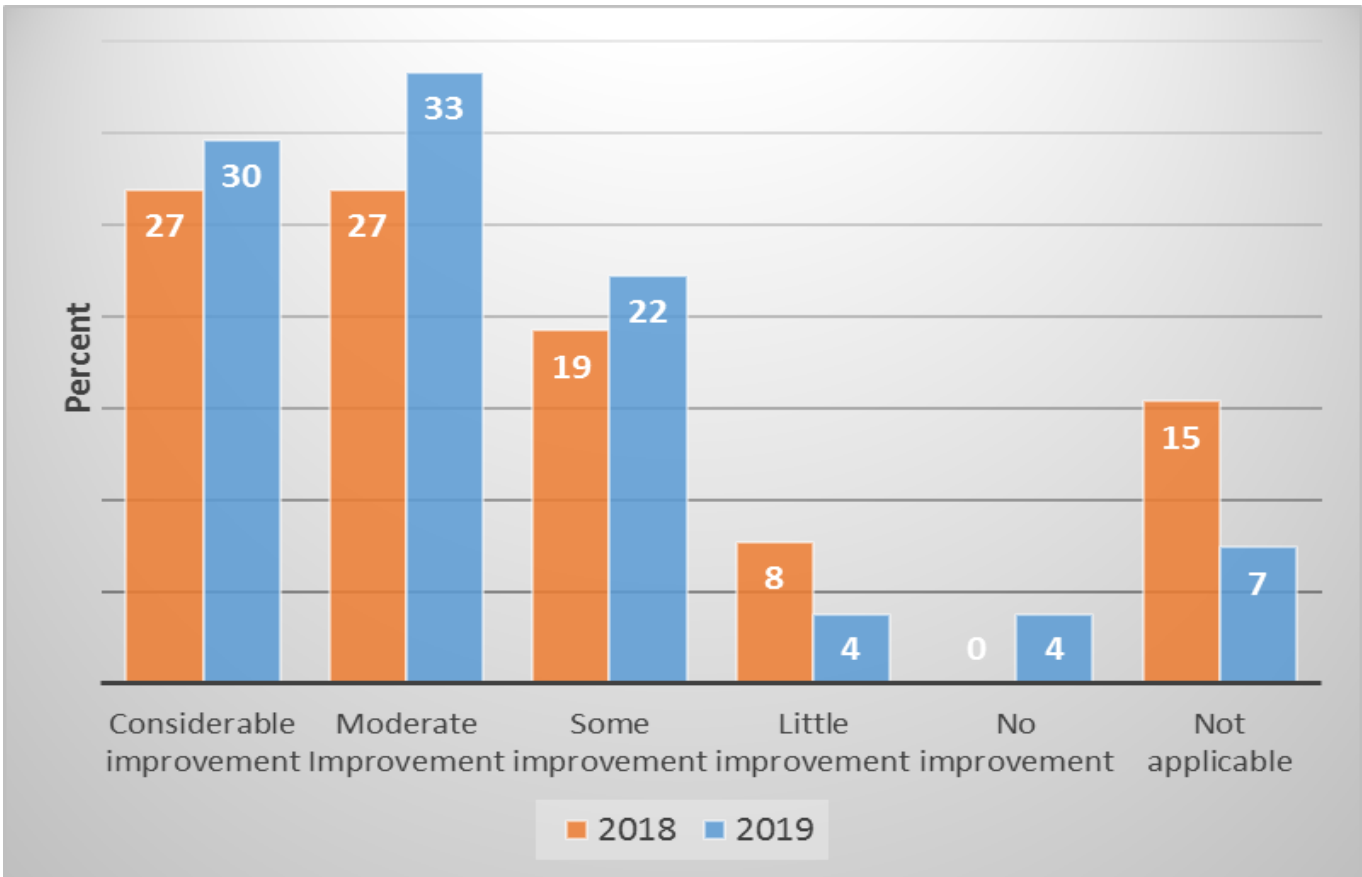
Impacts on Organizational Capacity

The survey question and rating scale to assess partners' organizational capacity was refined over the evaluation period, so year over year comparisons were not possible. We did gain an overall picture of trends and differences. The areas of organizational capacity included in this question in each of the three years are shown in Table 3. Partners consistently reported the greatest level of impact in the following areas:

1) Evaluation/research capacity.
2) Access to additional human resources (i.e. students, research assistants).
3) Ability to network and connect to other organizations, researchers, government representatives, etc. (2018 and 2019 only; this area was not included in the 2017 survey).

We explored the 2018 and 2019 survey findings for further trends and differences, as the organizational capacity question and rating scales were almost identical. Caution in interpreting these results is needed due to the sample modification in 2019 to just include 'project' partners. When responses were *combined* for all nine areas (Figure 5):

- **Partners reported greater levels of impact to their organizational capacity in 2019 compared to 2018**; 66% reported high levels (considerable or moderate) of improvement in 2019 compared to 54% in 2018.
- The percentage of partners reporting 'not applicable' reduced in 2019 (from 15% in 2018 to 7% in 2019), which may suggest that survey targeting was successful in reaching the appropriate partners.

Figure 5: Median reported improvement in organizational capacity (2018 & 2019)

When examining responses for *each of the nine individual areas* of organizational capacity:

- The percentage of partners reporting high levels of impact increased in 8 of the 9 areas.
- The areas with the largest increases were:
  - 'Ability to meet the needs of your clients' (52% to 70%)
  - 'Use of information/knowledge in decision-making' (54% to 70%)
  - 'Commitment to evaluation' (46% to 63%).
- 'Commitment to strategic thinking and planning' was the area that the smallest proportion of partners reported high levels of improvement in both years (35% and 37% respectively).

Table 3: Areas of capacity included in the organizational capacity survey question (2017-2019)

Areas	2017	2018	2019
1. Organizational capacity	✓	✓	✓
2. Commitment to evaluation	✓	✓	✓
3. Commitment to strategic thinking and planning		✓	✓
4. Appreciation for the importance of using information/knowledge in decision-making	✓	✓	✓
5. Use of information/knowledge in decision-making	✓	✓	✓
6. Evaluation/Research Capacity	✓	✓	✓
7. Access to additional human resources (i.e. students, Research Assistants)	✓	✓	✓
8. Ability to network and connect to other organizations, researchers, government representatives, etc.		✓	✓
9. Ability to meet the needs of your clients		✓	✓

Qualitative data from 2018 and 2019 partner surveys related to **organizational capacity** can be grouped into two areas of improvement:

1. Evaluation capacity:
Partners stated that their organization has increased evaluation capacity, including additional resources and organizational level commitment to evaluation. Organizational staff is seen to have increased knowledge about evaluation methods and processes which enables them to capture relevant learning to inform program development.

> *"We now have a full time staff person dedicated to evaluation along with new evaluation policies within the agency and an evaluation framework that has been designed and implemented."*

> *"CUP challenges us to reflect on what we are doing and why - it also provides us with a lens into organizational cultures that are quite different from our own. While this can be disconcerting, it helps us think and grow in ways that we would not have otherwise. We will continue to be an organization that evolves slowly, but I think the partnership with CUP helps keep us on a path that respects the broad range of research required to solve complex problems to improve health outcomes for children and their families."*

2. Program improvement and sustainability:
Partners described how knowledge from research and evaluation has strengthened their organization's ability to make evidence-informed decisions regarding their programs and services. This was seen to result in improved and more sustainable programming that meets the needs of their clients.

> *"CUP has provided information and research capacity that has influenced our priorities and directions."*

Impacts on Practice, Programs and Policies

In 2018 and 2019, an average of 61% of partners reported that their collaboration with CUP had impacted practice, programs and/or policies. Academic partners were the least likely to report an impact on their practice, program and/or policies (17%). We were interested in this finding and in follow up conversations with our academic partners, we discovered that given the scope of their organization (AKA the entire university) they found the question difficult to answer. CUP would not expect to have the same level of impact on an individual academic partners' practice as faculty or the entire institution. We will although explore this issue further as we conduct the analysis of our follow up partner interviews.

Qualitative examples of impacts on practice, programs and policies in 2019 corroborate those in 2018, in that the collaboration with CUP facilitates **evidence-informed decision making.** Partners explained how the collaboration with CUP has given them an understanding of program effectiveness and enabled them to make evidence-informed decisions in corporate strategic planning and in the development of their programs. One partner commented that the knowledge mobilization resources have enabled them to influence practice of front line staff. Some partners' stated that their funding decisions had been influenced by their collaboration with CUP, which was viewed as particularly important given the current financial restraints. The examples that partners gave primarily related to impacts on practice and programs rather than on policy.

> *"The knowledge mobilizing resources created through the partnership has allowed us to have greater capacity to influence front line practice of colleagues in public institutions and therefore strengthen our capacity to influence mainstream practice."*

CUP Steering Committee

Steering Committee members represent a different type of evidence informed capacity building for CUP. Our membership includes community, government, funding, and university representatives. CUP as an organization relies on the Steering Committee to provide direction, support, and leadership in our work. Our Committee also strengthens the relationship between the community and the university. In Committee meetings we engage in critical discussions of real world issues emerging in the social and health sectors. These discussions are cross sector, interdisciplinary, and reinforce the use of evidence to inform direction and outcomes. In 2019, we added an annual member survey to assess CUP's impact on our members' perspectives and work. Steering Committee members were asked to share their perspectives on what they do differently in their work based on their experiences with the Committee and how this has shifted the way they think about their work and organization. Comments can be categorized into three key themes:

1. Broadened perspectives

Many members described the Steering Committee meetings as inspiring and thought provoking. Members recognize the value of interdisciplinary thinking within the Committee and learning about innovative models and ways of working from other members. This was seen to broaden their own thinking and perspectives. Some members intentionally communicate inspiring approaches and ways of working within their own organizations.

> *"Mostly the meetings have reinforced/ reminded me of how valuable interdisciplinary thinking is in making me broaden my own perspective."*

2. Community engagement

Steering Committee members stated that they place greater emphasis on community engagement within their work due to their experience with the Committee, for example by prioritizing the involvement of community partners in executive meetings. Other members shared that their involvement had facilitated a greater level of community engaged scholarship, or that they feel more empowered in conducting participative research.

> *"It has brought my thinking about the connections between community and academia closer together - the reality of the existing collaborations and willingness of both to cross over boundaries/build new connections is real."*

3. Policy implications

Some members described how their involvement with the Committee had shifted their focus to policy issues within their work and using evidence to inform policy decisions.

> *"I pay greater attention to policy relevant implications of my work."*

What we learned and where we are going

The CUP model appears to be making a significant contribution towards its mission of nurturing environments where evidence contributes to effective practice, programs and policies. Partners have shared how collaborating with CUP has impacted their individual and their organizational access to and use of quality evidence that supports the healthy development of children, youth, and families. Integral to this success, is likely CUP's ability to build and maintain respectful and responsive partnerships with mutual trust. The quality of CUP's partnerships was consistently recognized by partners; this likely provides the foundation for meaningful and ethical community-based research and evaluation which meets the needs of communities. The emerging shift in CUP staff engagement in policy dialogue with partnerships is promising. This warrants further exploration and monitoring over time to identify impacts on community partners' capacity to influence policy decisions within their own organizations, and also at the public policy level. The evaluation has also highlighted important areas for future consideration and development for CUP. Namely, the need to consider how to ensure knowledge mobilization

efforts fully meet the individual needs of all partners and how we can meaningfully understand and grow the policy impact of our partnership. Additionally, consistent feedback from partners that they would like further opportunities to collaborate with CUP, coupled with the growing number of CUP projects year on year, highlights the need to consider the impacts of this on resources, capacity, and thus feasibility going forwards.

Capturing the increasing scale of student contributions to CUP partnerships and projects has been invaluable. CUP has provided unique opportunities for students from a variety of faculties to translate community-based research and evaluation theory into practice. Capturing students' experiences will be an important next step in the CUP evaluation, to fully understand the impacts of these opportunities for students and on their future career and research aspirations. Another valuable next step will be the analysis of the recent partner interviews; this will be instrumental in deepening our understanding of the longer term impacts and ripple effects of CUP collaborations. Finally, CUP evaluation learnings and continued commitment to this cycle of learning will be integral in helping to guide current and future strategic planning for CUP.