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## Want your nonprofit to have a data-driven culture? You need an enforcer

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*By Tony Abraham*

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### **D**ata nuts, don't take this too hard: but there's only so far you can take an Excel spreadsheet.

The staff at **ACHIEVEability** used to track all of their data in a single spreadsheet so exhaustively long they started calling it the "Dead Sea Scroll." But things started to change around 2011 when leadership at the nonprofit, which aims to use education as a means of ending the cycle of poverty, realized the document's size was holding back its potential.

"It's not enough to tell a very anecdotal or narrative story about success or impact with a client" said Director of Self-Sufficiency **Jamila Harris-Morrison**. "People want to understand the data beneath that."

ACHIEVEability, which celebrated its 35th year in April ([http://articles.philly.com/2016-04-17/news/72400528\\_1\\_urban-outfitters-navy-yard-supporters](http://articles.philly.com/2016-04-17/news/72400528_1_urban-outfitters-navy-yard-supporters)), has since moved on to a robust web-based database, and Harris-Morrison is charged with making sure data isn't an afterthought — it's on the forefront of every process. After 10 years with the organization, a big part of her job has become enforcing an organizational culture that depends on smart data collection and measurement.



Jamila Harris-Morrison (Courtesy Photo)

From funding to volunteers to internal operations, Harris-Morrison said everything the nonprofit does depends on compelling data: Whether or not the nonprofit has the resources to collect it, whether or not there have been any shifts numbers and what those changes might mean.

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It's not just about the quality of the data. It's about what the numbers are telling you, she said.

"[Saying] 95 percent of our students completed high school compared to 67 percent for the West Philadelphia average is a very different stat than just saying 10 students graduated high school," she said. "Those nuances have been able to articulate our impact in a different way."

ACHIEVEability is one of eleven organizations receiving funding and evaluation consulting services through 2017 from the **Building Capacity for Program Evaluation Initiative** ([http://www.scattergoodfoundation.org/RFA\\_evaluation#.V35x1VQrJhE](http://www.scattergoodfoundation.org/RFA_evaluation#.V35x1VQrJhE)), a program designed to improve how nonprofits are evaluating and tracking their impact. The initiative is led by the **Scattergood, Barra and Philadelphia Foundations**.

"We believe education is the pathway out of poverty and using education as a lever we can help individuals become self-sufficient. The other piece is parents take their children along on that journey. It's a really huge claim," said Harris-Morrison. "[The initiative] helps us break down those different parts."

The program is tailored to each organization and their needs, though Harris-Morrison said the cohort meets four times a year for trainings. For ACHIEVEability, she said, collecting top-shelf data isn't just about attracting attention from funders. It's about making sure the nonprofit is moving on its mission and continually learning.

"Data is the way to track that progress," Harris-Morrison said. "When something doesn't work out, that's OK. Why didn't it work out? What can we do differently? We use data to help make those decisions."

The next move, Harris-Morrison said, is figuring out how staff can run their own data reports — something that might have seemed almost unimaginable in the days of the Dead Sea Scroll.

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