Chosen Success Measures of Youth Programs:

An Open Systems Theory Case Study on How Youth Programs Secure Funding

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**Problem Statement**

**Open Systems Theory**

Open Systems Theory refers to the concept that organizations and programs are greatly influenced by the environment that they work within (Bastedo, 2004). Other public, private, and nonprofit organizations within the environment exert various forces that influence the internal workings of an organization. The external environment also provides organizations with necessary resources. While resources secure organizations’ survival, they also force organizations to change to the demands of those providing the resources. In this way, organizations, out of necessity, often become isomorphic with the needs and desires of the external environment. Therefore, one cannot explore the success and failure of an organization without simultaneously exploring the environment in which the organization operates.

Open Systems Theory becomes an ideal theory for explaining youth programs and their funding sources because youth programs use external funders—such as United Way, private donors, and the Government to run their operations. Therefore, youth programs are affected by the values and requirements of the outside environment. How youth programs choose to deal with their outside environment will be a primary focus going forward.

**Problem Statement Outline.** This capstone studies the funding environment of different types of youth programs, and specifically examines how the environment defines the indicators of success, in order to answer the questions: (1) why do programs choose to prioritize evidence in the way that they do, and (2) do programs that prioritize quantitative success-related evidence become a funding priority?

As an introduction, the problem statement will begin with a discussion of Evidence Based Practice, exploring the ways in which youth programs are pressured to define success in order to
secure funding. Following a discussion of Evidence Based Practice, the two general categories of youth program will be defined. Within the larger categories, specific youth program types will be explained to contextualize the two St. Louis youth programs used in this case study. Both case study programs will then be profiled. As a conclusion, research questions will be stated and outcomes will be discussed.

**Evidence Based Practice: Defining Success to Secure Funding**

Open Systems Theory can be used to discuss how youth programs work with their external environments to secure funding. As funding tightens, more pressure is put on youth programs to show evidence of success. This phenomena is captured by the trending phrase Evidence Based Practice (EBP). EBP, generally, relies on quantitative data that can be used to easily convey progress (Soydan & Palinkas, 2014). For youth programs, quantitative evidence may include student’s progress in standardized test scores, grade point averages, and enrollment numbers.

While the phrase EBP suggests objectivity, the hidden political dimension is the question of who defines evidence. Thus, this capstone takes an Open System Theory approach to explore how the external environment defines evidence, and how youth organizations’ internal environment interprets these evidence definitions to quantify and qualify their own success measures, as they work within the larger environment to gain resources.

**Types of Youth Programs Defined**

Most, if not all, youth programs will fall into one of two broad categories: youth development and youth leadership. Within these broad categories, many types of youth programs exist. We will focus on two: academic enrichment within youth development, and civic engagement within youth leadership.
**Youth Development.** The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth define youth development as, “a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent” (Edelman et al., 2004).

Many programs exist within the category of youth development. One of the most prominent are “academic enrichment programs.” These programs, as the name suggests, focus on increasing the academic skills of the clients. The Pathways to College Network describes academic enrichment programs as “instructional services designed to increase student performance in college preparation classes or to improve students’ opportunity to enroll in such classes,” (Gullat & Jan, 2003), highlighting the importance of academic advancement within this category of youth program.

**Youth Leadership.** Unlike youth development’s focus on improving the trajectory of youth, youth leadership programs focus instead on the ability of youth to be change-agents within their communities. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth believe youth leadership programs have two important components. First, the youth within these programs must have, “the ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, influence the opinion and behavior of other people, and show the way by going in advance” (Edelman et al., 2004). Of equal importance, youth within these programs develop, “the ability to analyze one's own strengths and weaknesses, set personal and vocational goals, and have the self-esteem to carry them out. [this] includes the ability to identify community resources and use them, not only to live independently, but also to establish support networks to participate in community life and to effect positive social change” (Edelman et al., 2004).
As the definition implies, networking youth with their community is an important aspect of youth leadership. As such, one of the more prominent types of youth leadership programs are “civic engagement” programs. In civic engagement programs, young people work on community action projects and participate in leadership development (Post, 2004).

A Case Study: Saint Louis Youth Nonprofits

Hundreds of youth programs exist within St. Louis. However, two serve as an ideal case study because they fully and accurately encompass the definitions of academic enrichment program, within youth development, and civic engagement program, within youth leadership. These case studies will serve as an example of how evidence is defined, how success is defined, how much funding is needed, and how funding is secured.

**College Bound of St. Louis.** College Bound of St. Louis is an academic enrichment nonprofit founded in 2006, by Lisa Orden Zarin. Currently serving 1,700 low-income students in the St. Louis region, College Bound’s mission is to, “provide promising students from under-resourced backgrounds with the academic enrichment, social supports and life skills needed to succeed in college and careers” (2014). Their ultimate goal is for students to not only get to college, but to graduate from college, at the same rate as their peers from all income levels. College Bound works with youth from the 9th grade, through their college graduation, in three linear programs entitled “Get Your Prep On,” “To & Through- High School,” and “To & Through- College Completion.” College Bound strives to level the academic playing field for low-income youth through intensive year-round academic support.

**Youth Leadership St. Louis (YLSL).** YLSL, a program within the larger nonprofit Focus of St. Louis, is a civic engagement program founded in 1989, currently serving over a hundred students from approximately 30 urban, suburban, rural, public, private, and parochial
schools throughout the St. Louis region. Focus St. Louis’ mission is to, “create a cooperative, thriving St. Louis region by engaging citizens to participate in active leadership roles and to influence positive community change” (2014). The YLSL program is a year-long program for high school juniors, with the goal of developing leadership skills, promoting teamwork among diverse groups, and providing a deeper understanding of the St. Louis region. Ultimately, YLSL strives to empower the region’s youth to become future community leaders. YLSL participants meet once per month during the school year. Workshops, programs and events include a combination of team-building exercises, conflict resolution models, experiential learning, and dialogues with community leaders.

**Research Questions and Predicted Outcomes**

**Research Questions to Explore.** In looking at different types of youth programs, through the lens of the chosen case study St. Louis programs, it will be important to explore how the external environment affects the adaptation of the organization as it tries to maneuver within a particular type of environment. Specifically, how does each program define and measure success? Does the program use “evidence-based” measures to quantify their success, or do they embrace a more qualitative approach to define success? Once these questions are answered, it must be determined *why* each organization defines success in the way in which they do. Are their success measures within their organization’s control, or are they dictated by outside forces? Finally, how does the organization use, or fail to use, their measures of success to secure funding? Once these questions are explored, they can help contextualize the success of youth organizations, generally, to work within their environment to secure funding- and ultimately, their survival.
Predicted Outcomes. Because of the current emphasis on evidence based practice, it is predicted that youth programs able to measure their success in quantitative, or numerical, terms will be more appealing to the outside environment, and therefore better able to secure funding and thrive within the environment. Academic enrichment programs have pre-defined quantitative evidence to measure their success (i.e. college acceptance, GPA, test scores). However, civic engagement programs, which are not designed for academic achievement, may not be able to use similar quantitative evidence sources. Many of the large, stable, and consistent funding sources use quantitative, academic, evidence to determine funding, and therefore, academic enrichment programs are more likely to establish and maintain consistent funding sources than civic engagement programs.

A Critique of Evidence Based Practice. If predicted outcomes are found to be valid, this capstone will serve as a critique on the emphasis for evidence based results. In the current environment, innovative youth programs, aiming to better youth beyond standardized success measures, may have difficulty securing consistent funding. This is not because these programs do not serve an important purpose, but rather because the environment that they operate within doesn’t value qualitative measures of success. As a result, innovated programs, often within the youth leadership category, are forced to find a way to quantify their evidence or their funding sources may be at risk. In order to prevent this, youth program funding sources would be required to broaden the types of evidence they would take as proof of success and worthy of funding. It may be that social service agencies adopt rational structures more for their symbolic value rather than functional utility. Thus, it is important to understand how both organizations count to one, i.e. decide on what to count and what constitutes an instance of the phenomenon,
and how the numbers are used. This will provide an understanding of how the outside
environment influences the organization’s internal structure.

**Literature Review**

**A History of Evidence Based Practice**

A little over 60 years ago, several critical studies denounced psychotherapy as being no
more effective than the passage of time (Eysenck, 2014). The blunt evaluation resulted in a
wake-up call that led to a host of developments including advances in the understanding of
diverse psychopathologies, enhancements in assessment and treatment practices, and
developments in experimental designs for the study of processes and outcomes associated with
psychosocial treatments. In turn, these advances spawned major meta-analyses that critically
examined the effects of psychotherapy (Ollendick, 2014). This movement, to identify treatments
that work, was labeled “evidence-based medicine” (Sackett, et al., 2000), which has evolved into
the broad phenomena referred to as “evidence-based practice” (American Psychological
Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice. 2006).

Evidence-based practice is a strategy for improving the outcomes of treatment that uses
research evidence to improve client care and future practice. While it does not typically align to
any one theoretical position or orientation, it holds that treatments and practice, of whatever
theoretical persuasion, ought to be based on predetermined objective and scientifically credible
evidence (Ollendick, 2014). Perhaps most crucial is the type of evidence valued through
evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice highly values information obtained from
randomized control trials and aggregated numerical data. While it also values information
obtained from basic research, observational studies, logical intuition, personal experiences, and
the testimony of experts, these forms of evidence are viewed as less credible and acceptable from
a scientific, evidentiary-based standpoint (Ollendick, 2014). Therefore, evidence-based practice does not lend itself as well to areas of study or practice that have a difficult time accumulating scientific, numerical, or control trial based evidence. Further, even fields which rely heavily on clinical trial data have criticized evidence-based practice as diminishing the necessary qualitative aspect to research and practice. Peter D. Kramer, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Brown University, warns that psychiatrists need stories, because unlike data, the vignette “retains the texture of the individual life” (p. 7). Many experts warn that an overreliance on numerical data and clinical trials in medicine will over simplify the unique individualism that must occur in practice. This same critique holds true when considering the vast array of individual client needs in the area of social work.

While originally intended for the health and medicine arena, evidence-based practice has spread to an array of disciplines, including social work. However, criticisms exist to the applicability of evidence-based practice in a social work context. Barriers exist between acquiring research and incorporating said research into daily operations with clients (Wike, et al., 2014). The research to practice gap is due to a number of factors, including individual skepticism of the usefulness of evidence-based practice to clinical practice problems in implementing evidence-supported interventions that show effectiveness only under certain circumstances, which are difficult to duplicate in a social work scenario (Wike, et al., 2014). The challenge of applying evidence-based practice to the social arena will remain a focus throughout this literature review, with primary emphasis given to how these challenges impact the nonprofit sector.

It has been the goal of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to find useful ways to use evidence-based practice to make organizations more efficient. In the following section, context will be given for how the evidence-based practice movement has played out in the
nonprofit sector. Specifically, the nonprofit accountability movement will be discussed. In the third and final section, the review will narrow to an evaluation of how evidence-based practice and the accountability movement has effected youth program development. This literature review will serve to explain why the study of how youth programs measure success in order to secure funding is the necessary next step of research.

The Nonprofit Accountability Movement

In recent years, skepticism regarding nonprofit effectiveness has increased. This is reflected in the rise of indirect market-based, policy solutions, such as tax credits, vouchers, and contracts with for-profit organizations for service provision (Howard, 2002; Salamon, 2005; Steuerle & Twombly, 2002). As nonprofit organizations began to lose credibility, evidence-based practice gained credibility. Nonprofits found themselves under increased pressure from funders and clients to demonstrate that they are efficiently and effectively achieving measurable outcomes. This shift has been described as the “accountability movement” (Murray, 2005; Tuan, 2004) within the nonprofit sector. The majority of accountability efforts have been performance-based, creating predetermined goals and judging organizational success on outcomes and results towards these goals (Anheier, 2005).

Nonprofit funders, including United Way, government agencies and foundations, have embraced the accountability movement and begun attaching performance measurement and outcome data reporting requirements to nonprofit funding (Hatry, 1999; Hatry, Wholey, & Newcomer, 2004; Hendricks, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Walker & Grossman, 1999). While funders have grasped the accountability movement, empirical literature suggests that many nonprofit organizations are struggling with the new requirements; reporting a lack of resources, time, and evaluation expertise to cater to the separate demands of several funders (David, 2006; Carmen &
Fredericks, 2008; Mott, 2006). Additionally, funders such as United Way are now requiring nonprofits to gain evidence-based accreditation from organizations such as the Council on Accreditation (COA), The Joint Commission, and CARF Accreditation before they can even apply for funding (United Way, 2010). This condition has made it essential for many nonprofits to consider what evidence they will use and how they will report progress before they are even in full operation. The effort to hold nonprofit organizations accountable is based upon a desire to ensure that funding dollars are spent effectively. However, such initiatives have resulted in fatigue and confusion from many nonprofits unable to meet the disparate and high-resource demands of many funders.

**Youth Program Accountability Development**

Youth programs have not been immune to the performance measures of the accountability movement. Indeed, youth have been a primary focus of social and government agencies over the last several years. United Way has developed a “collective impact” model to address the areas of education, family financial stability and family health (Gallagher, 2013). All three areas focus on the development of youth, and as such, United Way has been increasing the number of programs and organizations dedicated to achieving measurable programmatic goals involving youth development. While there are many agreed upon goals for improving the outcomes of youth within our country, challenges arise in the area of implementation, with the primary concern of how to integrate new evidence-based goals into pre-existing programs without compromising the integrity of the original mission (Whittaker, 2009). Moreover, as funds for youth programs are emphasized, and thereby increased, youth programs wishing to secure said funds will have to find ways to comply with the accountability measures prescribed by United Way and other funders. As evidence-based practice continues to gain traction, and the
accountability follows suit, research is needed on how youth programs have begun to respond and will continue to respond in order to secure funding and remain competitive within the changing nonprofit landscape.

**Methodology**

**Rationale for Case Study Research**

Limited research has been done regarding the chosen success measures of youth programs. Moreover, studies to explain why organizations and funders make certain decisions regarding what counts as evidence are difficult to obtain. Therefore, a case study of two St. Louis area youth programs with presumably different measures of success best allows for the collection and analysis of substantial quantities of detailed information. “There is simply no way to get a richer account of what is occurring than through a case study” (Salkind, 2003). Case studies in social research lend themselves to a robust interpretation, wherein the meanings of the actions can be analyzed in the context of socially constructed interpretations and meanings (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003). This case of study of College Bound of St. Louis and Youth Leadership St. Louis (YLSL) serves to describe and help interpret what counts as evidence and success within different organizations.

For the purposes of this particular research, a case study of the two chosen organizations allows for a comprehensive analysis of what counts as data, how success is measured, and how funding is secured. Specifically, College Bound of St. Louis, with their goal to help students get to and graduate from college, lends itself to the collection of numerical data such as test scores and college acceptance rates. YLSL, contrarily, has the goal of developing leadership skills within high school students. Thus, what counts as data to YLSL, and ultimately what counts as success, is unlikely to be as easily quantifiable as College Bound’s data measures. A case study,
then, is the most thorough research method for comparing and contrasting these dissimilar organizations, in order to determine if differences in what counts as evidence, what is deemed success within the organization, and how these measures help to secure funding do indeed exist.

**Data Sources**

Two primary sources of data were used in this case study in order to triangulate the research and determine if all sources point towards similar conclusions. The first data source come in the form of written material made available by the organizations. This data source includes website information, brochures, grant applications, and any other documents written by or written in reference to the organizations being examined. Much of this data was found though the organizations’ websites, but as interviews were conducted, several documents were volunteered, including blank pre and post-tests used to measure client growth, annual reports, program funder lists, and grant approval letters. Analyzing how the organizations choose to present themselves and describe their success was an integral part in determining what the organizations count as data, and how they link this data to their chosen success measures. The documents were grouped and analyzed according to theme, with further analysis conducted once trends emerged within the material.

The second source of data came by way of interviews with key stakeholders. From Youth Leadership St. Louis, both the Director of Youth Leadership St. Louis, Mary Dee Schmidt, and the Development Director of Focus St. Louis, Felicia Pulliam, J.D. were interview. From College Bound, the Director of College Readiness, Maureen Hanlon, and Grants Manger, Nicole Rainey, were interviewed. In terms of funders, Trisha Gordon, Funding Manager of the Community Investment Division of United Way of Greater St. Louis was interviewed. Several predetermined questions were asked in order to provide consistency and comparable data between the
organizations. The following questions were asked to both representatives for both case study youth programs:

1) What data/evidence do you collect for your program?
2) Why have you chosen to collect the data/evidence that you collect?
3) Has the data/evidence that you collect changed at all over time?
4) How can you tell when your program has been successful?
5) How do you seek to demonstrate/display this success?
6) Why has your program chosen the measures of success that it has?
7) Have your measures of success changed at all over time?
8) What is your program’s operating budget?
9) How does your program secure funding? Have you ever struggled to secure funding?
10) Has the way/s in which you secure funding changed at all over time?

In addition, the following questions were asked to the funding representative:

1) How do you determine which programs you are going to fund?
2) Has your criteria for funding changed at all over time?
3) Are there particular sorts of programs you prioritize supporting? Why?
4) What reporting requirements exist for the programs that you fund?
5) How do you determine if a program has met your requirements?
6) How can you tell if a program is successful?

Interviews were semi-structured. All predetermined questions were asked, along with follow up questions that arose either during the interview or during document analysis. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour and 15 minutes, and were voice recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy in analysis.

Once all documents were collected, and all interviews conducted, findings were compiled. In the sections below, findings will be presented and a multidimensional analysis will be done to interpret the data and glean answers to the research questions presented within the problem statement. A qualitative findings and analysis form was chosen based upon the types of data that was collected, and because a case study lends itself to a more in depth analysis of fewer data pieces. A large portion of the remainder of the paper will be a description of the findings, with an emphasis on themes that emerge. These findings will then be analyzed to determine if
and how they address the research questions presented, as well as discuss themes that were not anticipated in the initial research questions. Suggestions for possible further qualitative studies, as well as quantitative studies, will conclude the analysis.

Findings & Analysis

The conducted research sought to answer five research questions: (1) how does each program define and measure success? (2) Does the program use “evidence-based” measures to quantify their success, or do they embrace a more qualitative approach to define success? (3) Why does each organization define success in the way in which they do? (4) Are their success measures within their organization’s control, or are they dictated by outside forces? Finally, (5) how does the organization use, or fail to use, their measures of success to secure funding?

Answers to these questions fell into three broad categories of discussion, which will be examined in detail below: (1) Types of evidence or success measures identified by the organizations, (2) how organizations choose which success measures to use, and (3) how organizations use their success measures to remain viable and secure funding. It will be the purpose of these findings to explain the differences in how the academic enrichment program of College Bound of St. Louis and the civic engagement program of Youth Leadership St. Louis define, collect, and use success measures for the purposes of their organizational goals. Each section will conclude with an examination of how the findings relate to the predicted outcomes.

Types of Evidence/Success Measures

There are three primary kinds of evidence and success measures that were identified by the two organizations studied: numeric, anecdotal, and reputational. Within these types of evidence, youth development and youth leadership programs, as exampled in the case study,
emphasize different aspects. Each of the three types of evidence will be discussed below, with an emphasis on how the two case study programs identified evidence differently.

**Numeric Evidence.** For the purposes of this study, numeric evidence will be defined as the use of numbers collected in order to show growth or success. There are two ways in which these numbers can be collected. The first of which is using external pre-defined metrics, which are collected separately from the organization and reported outside of the program, but are used by the organization to show evidence. The second way in which numbers can be collected is internally. Internal numeric evidence is often collected from a metric that is created by the organization, and is self-reported within the organization.

The academic enrichment organization of College Bound of St. Louis uses externally reported metrics for all numeric evidence. There are four “big indicators” that College Bound of St. Louis collects on each of its clients: (1) Graduation from high school, (2) matriculation into college within 6 months of high school graduation, (3) college retention, and (4) graduation from college (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015). An important aspect of this evidence, mentioned by both Grants Manager, Nicole Rainey and Director of College Readiness, Maureen Hanlon, is that the evidence cannot be said to be biased, because it is externally created and reported. Nicole Rainey indicated the importance of comparability, emphasizing the ability to compare their clients with high school and college students within the community who did not receive their organization’s programs. She also discussed the importance of validation:

One thing that is important to us is having our numbers that we report externally be validated by an external source. So, high school graduation is validated by the high school. Matriculation into college is validated by the National Student Clearing House, and then persistence year to year in college is validated by logging into the online
systems at their college and looking at their payments, and then college graduate is validated by their colleges (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015).

Another benefit of numeric evidence is its ability to be reported precisely and show growth clearly. It is important to recognize the ease in which College Bound of St. Louis uses external numeric evidence. Because their organization is an academic enrichment organization, it seeks to lead student clients to perform well in pre-existing academic outputs.

Youth Leadership St. Louis, a civic engagement program, uses self-created metrics for all of their numeric evidence. The primary way in which they accomplish collecting numeric data is through a pre and post-test, which they give their 11th grade clients at the start of their year in the program, and again at the end. This pre and post-test assigns numerical growth to identified leadership skills. Below is an example of three questions taken from the Youth Leadership St. Louis Pre-Test Evaluation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to make positive decisions:</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(poor) (needs improvement) (adequate) (better than average) (currently excels)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I currently socialize and/or problem solve with persons different from myself:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(never) (seldom) (occasionally) (often) (very often)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge concerning issues relating to racial/ethical differences:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(poor) (needs improvement) (adequate) (better than average) (currently excels)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike academic enrichment programs, the sort of success that youth leadership programs are attempting to achieve is not as easily captured with numeric evidence. Therefore, the second and third type of evidence is more prominently used by Youth Leadership St. Louis.

**Anecdotal Evidence.** Within this study, anecdotal evidence can be defined as qualitative evidence that is based upon personal reports and observations. Anecdotal evidence requires that the organization’s members collecting evidence have an intimate understanding of organizational
goals and events. It is also common for anecdotal evidence to be self-reported from program clients. Anecdotal evidence can be used both to supplement numeric evidence, as well as serve as a primary way of displaying success. The extent to which anecdotal evidence is used varies largely by organization type.

The youth development organization of College Bound of St. Louis uses anecdotal evidence as a way to expand upon numeric evidence. Along with their big four indicators, individual stories of their clients help to personalize numeric reports. In the 2013 College Bound Annual Report, a section titled “Why We Exist” tells a story of one of their clients:

Reggie came to College Bound in that abyss between adolescence and young adulthood. His book had a cover, but the story had yet to unfold. He’d say he joined College Bound because people were nice, and snacks were dependable. The ecosystem of fatherless families, dangerous neighborhoods, unemployed or overworked mothers and siblings in the justice system, did not show their toll. Reggie began to read and write and rewrite his story in high school. Although he struggled to focus, he was determined to succeed. Throughout high school, Reggie showed an inner resolve we now describe as “grit.” After high school, Reggie went to Southeast Missouri State University and emerged as a deeply kindhearted leader… (2013).

Apart from personalizing numeric data, College Bound of St. Louis also uses anecdotal evidence as a way in which to explain anomalies within numeric evidence. For example, College Bound of St. Louis uses anecdotal evidence to explain a year within their organization where the external data collected was lower than most other years due to the unique personal circumstances of many of their clients.
The high school graduating class of 2013 are an anomaly at College Bound. They really struggled. One student didn’t graduate from high school, which is really rare. And then less than 90% of them matriculated into college within 6 months, and the year to year persistence rate for those students is really low… But there is a lot going on for those students. A couple of the students went to college and started living as openly gay for the first time. And doing that on top of the other stuff in their lives was just too much. One of them is enrolled in community college now, and one of them is not enrolled. We had one student who had two deaths in her family in her first semester and just couldn’t stay in college. And there was just a lot of struggle. But in grants, I list it all out in bullet points so the funders can see that they are all real people (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015).

In general, anecdotal evidence is used by College Bound of St. Louis as a supplement to numeric evidence, rather than as an independent success measure within their organization.

Unlike College Bound of St. Louis’ supplemental nature of using anecdotal evidence, the civic engagement program of Youth Leadership St. Louis uses anecdotal evidence as their primary way of defining success. There are several ways in which they do this. The first of which is by self-reported evaluations, taken by students at the end of each program event. In many of these evaluations, students either strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree to a series of questions. An example of one of these questions from the YLSL Diversity Discussion Day Student Evaluation states: “The black board activity helped me identify personal stereotypes” (2014). The student evaluations also often include thought questions for the students to reflect upon. Another form of anecdotal evidence that Youth Leadership St. Louis collects is from alumni, typically high school seniors who have just
graduated from the program, in the form of summer workshop evaluations. In these workshops, program staff presents the events and projects that they plan to implement in the coming year. Youth Leadership St. Louis takes the alumni feedback very seriously, and often implements changes from the anecdotal evidence collected in the evaluations, as Mary Dee Schmidt, Director of Youth Leadership St. Louis explained,

> Before the year even begins, we bring in graduates who go over the year with us, and they evaluate each workshop during the summer. So that is when they help us develop new curriculum or say “this doesn’t work and this is why.” They really are key to the evaluation program (M. Schmidt, personal communication, January 30, 2015).

The other primary source of anecdotal evidence collected by Youth Leadership St. Louis is from the participating school’s academic advisors. Advisors are teachers within the students’ schools, and they are therefore witness to the students’ leadership behavior in settings away from program events. They also serve as process observers during Youth Leadership St. Louis events and workshops. While much of the observation evidence is not formally collected, it is considered an important aspect of measuring success within the organization, as Mary Dee Schmidt described,

> For each of the workshops, the teachers are process observers and they observe the process for the students when they’re making decisions. So I think a great evaluation on a deeper level is the process of the teachers observing the students in their group, and then they give them feedback. Sometimes we have forms for them to do that. Other times they are just observing their leadership skills and presentations skills. Sometimes they may be looking for hidden biases. (M. Schmidt, personal communication, January 30, 2015).

Anecdotal evidence is, by its very nature, more difficult to collect in a systematic way, but it is nevertheless considered crucial evidence for measuring program success.
Reputational Success. Within this study, reputational success is defined as a history of fondness for the organization or fondness for leaders within the organization. While reputational success is not a form of evidence, per se, it is often used in conjunction with evidence, and, for both organizations, is considered an important part of interacting with the external environment. For each of the case study organizations, reputational success manifests in different ways.

College Bound of St. Louis is a younger organization, founded in 2006. Therefore, they have used the charismatic leadership of their founder, Lisa Orden Zarin to gain positive reputation within the community:

A lot of our relationships in the early days were our founder’s relationships. And then she built new relationships as the organization grew. She was the stabilizing force and she really loved development and building relationships. So she had people who were her personal contacts and that grew to new contacts for College Bound (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015).

Focus St. Louis is a much older organization, which has included the Youth Leadership St. Louis program for 26 years. According to the Director of Youth Leadership St. Louis, the program has been around for long enough that graduates from the program have gone on to become advisors of the program. Longevity of the organization is a form of reputational success within itself, and indeed has become its own source of evidence when members of the organization seek to explain the success of Youth Leadership St. Louis. For example, while being interviewed, the Focus Development Director, Felicia Pulliam, mentioned that there were donors and funders who had consistently given money to Youth Leadership St. Louis for the past 20 or more years. In general, reputational success is used a form of evidence to show that the
organization serves a purpose, and has been successful enough at serving said purpose that it has created a positive reaction from the community it operates for and within.

**Alignment to Predicted Outcomes.** In the problem statement of this paper, several predicted outcomes were stated. One of these predicted outcomes was the following:

Academic enrichment programs have pre-defined quantitative evidence to measure their success (i.e. college acceptance, GPA, test scores). However, civic engagement programs, that are not designed for academic achievement, may not be able to use similar quantitate evidence sources.

This predicted outcome very much aligns to the first two types of evidence that were defined: numeric and anecdotal. Due to the academic enrichment nature of their organization, College Bound of St. Louis primarily uses numeric, quantitative, evidence from pre-defined, external, sources. In contrast, the civic engagement program of Youth Leadership St. Louis, which does not measure student success in terms of academic numbers, is drawn to using anecdotal, qualitative, evidence to measure success within their program.

**How Organizations Choose Success Measures**

While many factors contribute to how organizations choose how to measure success, three factors remained consistent among both case study organizations: (1) the mission of the organization, (2) the funding requirements of the funders, and (3) the maturity of the organization.

**Organizational Mission.** In every nonprofit organization, the mission drives action. It was also found that the organization’s mission drove how the organization chose to measure success. The mission of College Bound of St. Louis is stated as:
Preparation. Placement. Persistence to degree completion. College Bound provides promising students from under-resourced backgrounds with the academic enrichment, social support and life skills needed to succeed in college and careers (2014).

The primary goal of the organization is for their clients to achieve high school and college degree completion. As such, they use high school and college graduation as their primary indicators of success. This success measure is numeric, using externally reported metrics of high school degree completion percentage, number of college acceptance letters, months required to matriculate to college, and college graduation rates.

Focus St. Louis has the overarching mission to “create a cooperative, thriving St. Louis region by engaging citizens to participate in active leadership roles and to influence positive community change” (2014). The program of Youth Leadership St. Louis, within Focus, attempts to “empower the region’s youth to become future community leaders” (2014). As such, they attempt to use success measures that help to determine if they have empowered their clients and engaged them as citizens who seek to influence positive community change. There has been some effort within the program to create numeric evidence around these abstract goals. One of the ways in which they accomplish this is through assigning numeric value to pre and post-test questions that seek to answer if students have internalized the skills necessary to become leaders. I.e. “I currently volunteer my time to make a positive difference in my community,” with a 1 assigned to the answer “never,” a 2 assigned to “seldom,” a 3 assigned to “occasionally,” a 4 assigned to “often,” and a 5 assigned to “very often.”

However, the mission of Youth Leadership St. Louis generally lends itself to anecdotal evidence to capture success. Because the mission is attached to subjective outcomes, so too are the chosen success measures. The primary way in which success is measured is through self-
reported evaluations from student clients and anecdotal reporting from teacher advisors. Even the numeric pre and post-tests are self-reported. To build leaders, Youth Leadership St. Louis believes in looking to the client to act as a leader in identifying what their growth has been. As Director of Development Felicia Pulliam explains, “Pre and post-test, traditionally, have been recognized as the most obvious way, from the learners point of view, to understand what their growth has been from participation in the program” (F. Pulliam, personal communication, February 3, 2015). Therefore, the mission of the organization to develop leaders directly influences the decision of the organization to collect anecdotal evidence from clients.

**Funding Requirements.** In choosing success measures, organizations desire to choose measures that can clearly message organizational achievement to funders, hold the organization accountable, and be tailored to match individual funding requirements. This task is easier and more streamline for organizations that can readily use numeric evidence as their primary indicator of success. College Bound Grants Manager Nicole Rainey asserts that College Bound of St. Louis’ big four indicators satisfies most funders. However, College Bound also collects numeric data on a host of other indicators, including: demographic data on students, high school grade point average, grade point average growth, ACT prep scores, ACT scores, and college federal funding (M. Hanlon, personal communication, January 27, 2015.) This collected evidence is then drawn upon when certain funders are seeking to fund organizations that are working towards goals aligned to their mission. For example, when College Bound accepted funding from USA Funds, a college access organization, College Bound was required to comply with USA Fund’s standardized outcomes, which included categories such as GPA reporting, (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015). Thus, the satisfaction of funders contributes
to how College Bound chooses what to consider success, in so far as what they report on can change
when funders require different indicators.

Youth Leadership St. Louis also recognizes the importance in appealing to funders. Despite the subjective
nature of their program, Youth Leadership St. Louis attempts to make progress within their program’s ability
to display success to those outside of their organization. One of the ways in which they do this is to quantify
growth through the numeric values in their pre and post-tests. Further, Director of Development Felicia Pulliam
is looking for ways in which to increase the use of success measures that are externally created and attached
to numeric values. One success measure she is working to incorporate is the use of an Emotional Intelligence
Quotient (EIQ) test, which generates a numeric score in correlation with emotional development. In this way,
Youth Leadership St. Louis considers funding requirements and funder preferences when choosing success
measures.

In accordance with the nonprofit accountability movement, funders are beginning to focus more on measurable
outcomes, with an emphasis on external indicators. Trisha Gordon, Funding Manager of the Community
Investment Division at United Way of Greater St. Louis, confirms the appeal of numeric success measures to
funders, with the explanation that numbers have an advantage in that they easily show growth. Trisha Gordon
also discusses a large shift that has recently taken place in United Way’s funding process. Prior to the recent
change, United Way was an organization with a fairly “soft approach” to program accountability. As long as
organizations had clients coming in, were still getting Federal and State dollars, and the outcomes they
reported appeared reasonable and consistent, United Way would “take an organization at their word.”
Now that we have implemented our standard outcome indicators, we are starting to get a little bit more focused on the data. Now our agencies are being challenged to report very credible data. Not only are we looking at the numbers that they report out for their programs, we are also looking at what type of tools they used. We are really holding them accountable. So, if it is youth development, we want to know which tools they were using. Is that outcome based on best practices in the youth development field? Where did you get that outcome? What makes you think that it is credible to use? So we are really they are reporting their data. Hence, we came up with our 58 outcome indicators.

United Way’s new 58 outcome indicators are a list of statements all starting with the word “clients” and include “clients are promoted to the next grade level,” “clients maintain/improve school attendance,” and “clients retain employment for at least three months” (United Way of Greater St. Louis, 2015). While some of the indicators are currently vague, and would be difficult to report numerically, such as “clients experience a sense of belonging,” the majority of indicators could be assigned to a metric that is numerically translatable. United Way serves as an important example of how important it is for organizations to choose success measures that align to the accountability priorities of their funders.

**Organization Maturity.** The age and maturity of an organization plays a significant role in determining which success measures a program chooses. As organizations mature, they are able to better focus the goals of programs and streamline measures to show those goals. As an organization ages it is also able to capture the long term effects of programs, and glean successes from them. College Bound of St. Louis has adjusted its success measures over time. At the start of the organization, there were many more than four big indicators of success, but Grants Manager Nicole Rainey believes that the maturity of the organization helped to result in its
decision to report on the big four that are now used, emphasizing the fidelity in the numbers chosen. College Bound is a young organization, less than a decade old, and time will tell whether their success measures continue to change as their organization ages.

Youth Leadership St. Louis was founded in 1989. As such, they have had time to witness how the program influences its clients many years into the future. This ability has led to success measures that focus around the self-reported effects the organization has had on alumni. Further, Youth Leadership St. Louis Director, Mary Dee Schmidt deems it a measure of success that many alumni are currently involved in the Youth Leadership St. Louis program as teacher advisors, or volunteers. In addition, efforts are being made to better track the lives of alumni once they leave the program. Mary Dee Schmitz believes that knowing the careers and life decisions of past clients will be a clear indicator of program success, and as such they hope to grow in the area of involving graduates on a much larger scale, including developing systems to maintain more consistent and long term contact with graduates. Felicia Pulliam also points out the necessity of time in showing that clients have developed leadership skills:

Learning is a journey. Leadership is a journey. Those things like “I commit to this” or “I better understand this issue” or “yes I recognize privilege and poverty and how that impacts education in my community.” Ok, you’ve learned those things. You were supposed to be able to learn those things. But, how you evolve into citizenship and what that impact is, that can be over the course of a lifetime. That’s why you have a kid who is in YLSL in their junior year in high school and goes on to be Eric Brighton’s founder of Mission Continues and comes back and says “I learned this stuff in the 11th grade. He couldn’t do that as an 11th grader. That is a 10 or 15 year journey (F. Pulliam, personal communication, February 3, 2015).
Due both to the age and maturity of the organization, Youth Leadership St. Louis has created success measures around the long-term effects of the program on the youth it serves.

Alignment to Predicted Outcomes. It was predicted that funding requirements would be a significant factor in organizations determining how to choose success measures. While both case study organizations certainly consider funders when deciding which success measures to emphasize, the mission of the organization and the maturity of the organization play a larger role in determining how organizations chose success measures. It is necessary, then, to not simply look at how organizations choose their success measures, but also explore how organizations use their chosen success measures.

How Organizations Use Their Success Measures

Not all measures of success are used to secure funding. Generally, outside forces do not dictate all success measures, but they manipulate how those measures are displayed. Success measures can be broken into two broad categories: external use and internal use. Both the success measures chosen and the display of those success measures change significantly for internal and external uses.

External Use. External success measures are compiled with the purpose of being externally reported, both to advertise the program to potential future clients, and to secure and maintain funding of the program. As such, the external use of success measures are dictated by, and intended to impress, funders and/or potential future clients. External success displays are often as simplistic as possible, as they are intended to be easily displayed in funder-desired form.

Funders effect how College Bound of St. Louis success is externally displayed. As discussed, some funders have very specific outcomes that they are seeking, and therefore control the way in which such evidence is used. College Bound also educates itself to industry standards
both when determining success measures, and when deciding how to report on those measures. Though indicating that securing funding is always challenging, Nicole Rainey answered “absolutely” when asked if numerical data makes it easier to secure funding. She added,

It is very quantifiable. You can just follow the bouncing ball with the numbers. And I recognize that it is not that easy for other agencies. Our Director of Development used to work for a woman’s shelter, Lydia’s House. And women lived there for a while so they had some information on if it worked, but it was difficult because there wasn’t a story to tell with numbers. (N. Rainey, personal communication, February 4, 2015).

College Bound of St. Louis also uses anecdotal evidence in external reporting, as highlighted in the “Love Letters” portion of their website, which collects quotes of praise from educators, community members, volunteers, and College Bound clients and alumni.

Youth Leadership St. Louis also use numeric data to show growth to funders in a simplistic way, in the form of pre and post-tests. Indeed, the pre and post-tests are the primary form of numeric evidence that the development team presents to funders. However, the way in which this data is displayed changes according to funder.

All of the funders are different. Everybody wants something different. They all have different relationships to the program. You steward those relationships as they are appropriate. They all get the same exact numbers but some are really interested in that and some are less so. (F. Pulliam, personal communication, February 3, 2015).

Other numeric evidence that is used externally includes the years the organization has been in operation and the number of clients the operation has served. As their website boasts, “Focus impacts over 10,000 people each year through our six leadership program, numerous citizen engagement initiatives and active alumni network” (2014).
In contrast to College Bound, who primarily uses numeric evidence in external reporting, the primary success measure that Youth Leadership St. Louis uses externally is reputational success. Felicia Pulliam explains that while funders are constantly shifting, many of their funders are long time contributors, and continue to do so because of the longstanding presence of the organization:

I believe in having decent relationships with our supporters. The funders shift, but not regularly. There are people who have been funding YLSL for 20 years. They love it. They know the value of it, and it is just something they are going to do… We have been around for a long time and a lot of people know about us (F. Pulliam, personal communication, February 3, 2015).

Further, Youth Leadership of St. Louis uses their reputation to secure new funders and clients.

**Internal Use.** External uses of success measures have the goal of securing funding and gaining clients, and as such, they are often simplistically reported and are dictated by external environment. However, organizations do not choose success measures with the sole purpose of reporting them externally. Rather, organizations also choose success measures that will aid the organization internally. The primary purpose of internal success measures is to develop and better the program on which they are being collected. Internal use often falls into all three categories of success measures: numeric evidence, anecdotal evidence, and reputational success.

College Bound of St. Louis collects evidence on dozens of indicators other than their big four reporting indicators. Some examples of these include demographic data on students, high school grade point average, grade point average growth, ACT prep scores, ACT scores, and college federal funding (M. Hanlon, personal communication, January 27, 2015). Further, while they do not generally report it externally, College Bound is committed to improving the mental
health of their clients and, as such, collects both numeric and anecdotal data regarding the wellbeing of the students in their program.

One the other side of things we do some social/emotional work. We have two therapists on staff. We have one who works with students and one who works with families. We partner with STLCFD (St. Louis Center for Family Development). They both use a variety of instruments to judge the success of their practice. (M. Hanlon, personal communication, January 27, 2015).

All of the internal data collected by College Bound is organized by program managers into a database, and used when internally evaluating a program to determine how best to improve it or expand upon it.

Youth Leadership St. Louis uses the majority of the evidence it collects to work upon program improvement. They receive numeric and anecdotal feedback after every event and again from advisors and alumni in between program years. This evidence is used to adjust events and learning experiences to best develop leadership skills within their clients. This focus on internal improvement is evident in the value they place on feedback, collecting it from current clients, graduates, advisors, and staff (M. Schmidt, personal communication, January 30, 2015). In addition, Youth Leadership St. Louis subscribes to a fluid structure, in which observation can quickly provide evidence of success, or need for adjustment. This type of defining success does not work well externally, because of its constant change and messy nature, but is embraced by Youth Leadership St. Louis’ internal stakeholders, because it aligns well to the qualitative and developmental nature of their program.

**Alignment to Predicted Outcomes.** It was predicted that youth programs able to measure their success in quantitative, or numerical, terms would be more appealing to the outside
environment, and therefore better able to secure funding and thrive within the environment. Evidence of this is shown in how even Youth Leadership St. Louis, a program with subjective and qualitative goals, uses growth percentage, and other numeric evidence, when reporting externally. Indeed, both the organizations studied and the United Way funder interviewed confirmed that clean and clear numeric evidence is most appealing to funders. It was also predicted that because many of the large, stable, and consistent funding sources use quantitative, academic, evidence to determine funding, academic enrichment programs are more likely to establish and maintain consistent funding sources than civic engagement programs. This predicted outcomes was not fully confirmed. While quantitative success measures aid in funding, so too does the reputation and longevity of the organization. While College Bound of St. Louis is better able to secure funding through their numeric evidence, in substitute for numbers, Youth Leadership St. Louis uses relationships built over time to maintain consistent funding. The analysis of this research will discuss the implications these findings have on civic engagement programs who are not well established and are trying to enter the funding stream at a time when evidence based practice is emphasized.

Summary and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The study explored three dimensions of organizational accountability information: (1) types of evidence or success measures employed by the case study organizations, (2) how organizations choose which success measures to use under what circumstances, and (3) how organization then use their success measures to remain viable and secure funding. The three categories of success measures identified by the case study organizations were: numeric, anecdotal, and reputational. Generally, the academic enrichment organization of College Bound
of St. Louis uses externally reported numeric evidence, with supplemental anecdotal evidence to explain any anomalies in the numbers reported. The civic engagement program of Youth Leadership St. Louis uses numeric evidence in the form of a pre and post-test that attaches numeric values to leadership skills. However, Youth Leadership of St. Louis relies most heavily on self-reported anecdotal evidence from clients and advisors, and hinges their success on their long-standing reputation within the community.

Research found that the case study organizations choose their success measures based upon the mission of their organization, the funding requirements of their funders, and the maturity of their organization. Moreover, the purpose of each organization lends itself to particular success measures. Academic enrichment organizations are able to use academic numbers, such as graduation and college acceptance rates, while civic engagement organizations must rely more heavily on self-reported evidence of client satisfaction or observed changes in leadership skills. Funding trends influence the actions of both organizations, with an accountability movement pressuring all organizations to move towards standardized indicators of success. However, it ought to be noted that Youth Leadership St. Louis is less affected by funding trends. The maturity of their organization has led them to stable funding sources based entirely on their track-record of sustainability.

Once success measures are chosen, they are utilized for two purposes: external use and internal use. External success measures, because of their function of being externally reported, are displayed as simplistically as possible, favoring numeric evidence to show growth. Internal success measures, rather, are used to aid the organization in-house. Generally, all three types of success measures (numeric, anecdotal, and reputational) are used internally within an
organization in order to develop and improve program decisions. As such, organizations collect far more evidence than they intend to use externally to either gain clients or secure funding.

**An Open Systems Theory Interpretation**

Open Systems Theory posits that organizations and programs are influenced and affected by the environment that they work within and for (Bastedo, 2004). Specific for this study, Open Systems theorizes that the funding environment, due to its purpose of providing organizations with resources, plays an important role in dictating what success measures organizations choose to use. Findings point towards the viability of this theory. The external environment has been engulfed in the notion that a practice should display evidence to prove its success. In the nonprofit sector, this trend has manifested in the nonprofit accountability movement. As the environment puts increased value in showing proof of success, organizations must create success measures that reflect this environment. The effect of both evidence based practice and the nonprofit accountability movement on nonprofit youth programs is examined below.

**The Effect of Evidence Based Practice.** The evidence based practice movement began with the noblest of intentions: to identify which treatments work and improve the outcomes of treatments to allow for consistent client care. However, its emphasis on predetermined objective and scientifically credible evidence (Ollendick, 2014) lends itself to a limiting structure, which values aggregated numerical data at the expense of necessary qualitative aspects to research and practice. The effect of evidence based practice on youth organizations is clear. Regardless of the type, mission, or vision of the youth organization- numbers matter. And if the evidence based practice movement continues, numeric data will continue to hold value over individual situations, stories, and qualitative evidence.
**Evidence based practice critiqued.** While numbers appear objective, determining what to count is a political decision. Those with power in the external environment both assign value to numeric systems, (i.e. determining how many correct answers on the ACT are needed for college entrance), and dictate funding based upon an organization’s ability to succeed within that metric. In this way, the emphasis on numeric data is no more objective than client-reported anecdotal data. Moreover, the current environment disadvantages innovative youth programs who aim to serve youth beyond standardized success measures. These organizations must either adopt tools that quantify a very qualitative process, such as the pre and post-tests used by Youth Leadership St. Louis, or they may find their funding sources in jeopardy. As a result, programs that do not lend themselves to standardized success measures, especially those which lack maturity and a favorable reputation in the environment, are likely to struggle to secure funding.

However, as Youth Leadership St. Louis helps to show, those organizations who have survived in the environment for many years find it easier to inoculate themselves from the excesses of the evidence based practice movement. As open system theory postulates, organizations, out of necessity, become isomorphic with the needs and desires of the external environment (Bastedo, 2004). Those organizations with strong roots do not need to bend to the changing winds of the environment, and are therefore better shielded from isomorphic tendencies. As a result, young and start-up organizations find themselves working to meet the standards of evidence based practice out of a necessity that older environments are better able to weather until the winds change. The inconsistent use of evidence based practice stands as another of its critiques, but it must be emphasized that as it becomes increasingly important to the external environment, those organizations whose purpose does not align to the collection of numeric evidence will find it harder and harder to stand up within the environment.
The Effect of the Nonprofit Accountability Movement. The nonprofit accountability movement holds an important purpose. Specifically, organizations who receive donor and government money ought to be held accountable to the environment they operate within. Pressure exists in the nonprofit sector to demonstrate that clients are being served efficiently and effectively (Murray, 2005; Tuan, 2004). In conjunction with the evidence based practice movement, the majority of accountability efforts have focused around being able to show client growth, generally attached to external numeric tools. Both College Bound of St. Louis and Youth Leadership St. Louis confirm a trend of heightened accountability. This is emphasized by the push to ensure that both qualitative and quantitative success metrics come from an external source. All four of College Bound’s big outcomes are externally reported, and Youth Leadership St. Louis is currently in the process of researching externally created pre and post-tests, along with considering introducing an Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EIQ) test to their success metrics. The nonprofit accountability movement is even more solidified by United Way’s transition to the implementation of 58 outcome indicators, which will be used to hold United Way funded organizations accountable for client outcomes.

The nonprofit accountability movement critiqued. A primary concern of the nonprofit accountability movement is that as accountability becomes increasingly important, youth organizations will be forced to bend to fit the external tools that those who hold power in the environment choose to use in order to hold organizations accountable. While internally created metrics may better reflect an organization’s mission, as well as better measure success, they are prone to be used less and less as time progresses. What is likely to result is an environment of organizations all using the same tools, and as a consequence, all working towards similar missions. If this movement progresses, diversity among organizations will decrease. The push to
stay viable in the external environment, then, will have negative results in the areas of organization individuality and the use of rich, multilayered, success measures.

**Study Limitations**

There are two primary limitations to the study conducted. The first involves the youth organizations which were chosen. There is a significant age difference in the two programs examined, with College Bound of St. Louis less than a decade old, and Youth Leadership of St. Louis 26 years in age. Because of this maturity discrepancy, it is difficult to determine if their viability in the environment is due to their chosen success measures or if it is due to the years they have been able to adapt, and place a foothold, within the environment. The second limitation involves case studies in general. A case study is useful in it’s in depth view, but it is also limiting because it only studies a narrow number of cases. In this study, only two organizations were examined. As such, any anomalies that exist within either of the organizations may mistakenly be attributed to its type of youth organization, rather than its unique conditions and operations. These limitations suggest that more studies ought to be done in order to confirm, deny, or expand upon any findings.

**Suggestions for Future Studies**

The findings of this capstone study open opportunities for several future studies, both qualitative and quantitative. A possible qualitative study would be structured similarly to this study, but would examine organizations of the same or similar age, in order to control for one of this study’s primary limitations. To determine how deeply the nonprofit accountability movement is affecting youth programs, future case studies could follow start-up youth organizations as they attempt to infiltrate and survive in the current evidence-based environment. In addition, larger studies could examine several organizations simultaneously, to compare youth
organizations of the same type to each other, as well as to youth organizations of a different type. Finally, a qualitative longitudinal study could be conducted to better understand how success measures and success messaging changes within an organization over time, as the external environment and funding requirements change around it.

Several quantitative studies could also be performed. A numeric study of the funding streams to many youth organizations in the St. Louis region over time could highlight which organization types get external preference. Additionally, a study that compares the years of operation of many youth organizations could help to better understand how external funding trends affect the lifespan and viability of youth organizations. However, quantitative studies in isolation may fail to fully explain how organizations navigate their environment, so it is recommended that any quantitative study be accompanied by in-depth qualitative analysis.

It was the purpose of this study to get a glimpse into how external environments dictate the inner operations and success measures of youth organizations. It is my hope that future studies will help to shed light on this open system, and challenge current wisdom, which values numeric evidence over the anecdotal stories of clients and staff, regardless of whether an organization’s mission and vision aligns to showing growth through quantitative metrics. One of the ways in which this may be done is by studying this phenomena from the other end. Instead of looking at the external environment through the lens of the organizations’ isomorphism to it, an examination must be done of those with the power to determine what evidence to count and place value on. Funders, such as United Way, ought to be critically examined. How do they determine objectivity in their outcome indicators? What does this “objectivity” look like in practice, and what does it mean for the use of discretion in determining program success? Are innovative programs at risk of losing funding if they do not measure success through numeric
metrics? Organizations who hold power in the youth nonprofit environment must be asked to
defend their decisions, explain their rationale, and ensure both organizations and clients within
the environment that their decisions will not harm new and creative approaches to develop, grow,
and enrich our future- our youth.
References

American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice.


