

# Co-Create Connects Community & Campus to Answer Important Questions



Co-Create puts the spirit of [The Wisconsin Idea](#) into action: an innovative new way for nonprofit and community groups and others to tap into the university's knowledge and expertise and collaborate to advance the well-being of our communities.

It's just one of the many ways the School of Human Ecology's [Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies](#) fosters opportunities to apply research and learning to create meaningful social change.

"We saw a growing need for data to answer the tough questions that nonprofits and others in civil society are facing," says Amy Washbush Hilgendorf '02, MS'08, PhD'11, Associate Director for Engaged Research and leader of [Co-Create](#), which launched in 2018. "These organizations have distinct challenges that we can help address, like evaluating the effectiveness of a certain initiative or gathering information from community members about a new program."

## CO-CREATE BY THE NUMBERS

Since 2018, Co-Create has worked on/with:

- 40+ projects
- 21 organizations and agencies, including:
  - 13 nonprofits
  - 2 philanthropic organizations
  - 4 government agencies or schools
- 6 UW-Madison partners

Often, nonprofit and community groups need these answers quickly. Co-Create facilitates a faster turnaround time and connections with precisely the right faculty, staff, and students. Engaging undergraduate and graduate students is a key piece of the program's success. Students develop valuable skills through hands-on experience, while organizations benefit from a rich group thinking process.

Sandie Thao MS'20 began working with Co-Create as a student and after

graduating was offered the position of Research Specialist with the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies. She describes the relationship between the university and the community as transformative: each person coming in with their own distinct expertise and working together to solve problems, rather than the top-down approach that community-based research can sometimes take. "My passion is really on-the-ground applied research and Co-Create is here to

exchange ideas and offer direct support that will provide the most benefit for organizations,” Thao says.

Hilgendorf also stresses the importance of collaboration and a team approach. Each Co-Create project is carefully tailored to align with the organization’s goals, existing processes, and culture. The process starts with in-depth conversations to understand exactly what the group wants to know. Then, Hilgendorf assembles a team and together they design the project, which may include interviews, focus groups, surveys, and more, often in iterations or inquiry cycles. Finally, the team brings their findings back to organizations and facilitates conversation to bridge the learning to action steps.



In general, there are five types of services Co-Create offers to nonprofit and community groups, depending on their objectives.

1. Evaluations of programs and initiatives — includes program evaluation, evaluation plans, and data management consulting.
2. Needs assessments and applied research projects — includes stakeholder engagement, data collection (e.g., through surveys, interviews or focus groups), and analysis to identify gaps, inform next steps, and support understanding of significant issues and trends.
3. Research-to-practice translation — involves examining existing scholarly and practitioner literature to answer important questions. Past projects include examining fundraising trends for charitable organizations, best practices in nonprofit board leadership, and the impacts of community organizing.
4. Professional development and organizational capacity-building — education on topics such as program planning and evaluation, community engagement, and using data to advance mission, as well as advisement on and development of internal policies, processes, and best practices.
5. Support for community-engaged research projects connecting UW-Madison researchers with community organizations — Co-Create provides support such as partner communication and relationship building, data collection design, and implementation and multi-audience/multi-media dissemination. Co-Create can also match researchers and community partners and help with collaborative design and submissions for funding for projects.

A variety of groups work with Co-Creat e, but most fall under the heading of community and civil society, with focus areas ranging from early childhood education and healthy families to restorative justice.

YWCA Madison first connected with Co-Creat e after receiving a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and based on a recommendation from public health colleagues. Together with Milwaukee-based UBUNTU Research and Evaluation, they completed a multi-year program evaluation and community needs assessment to deepen understanding of the impact of current Restorative Justice initiatives on youth — specifically Black youth, youth of color, and youth with other marginalized identities — resulting in youth-centered recommendations, a customized evaluation toolkit, and relevant maps to make sense of their data.

“We’ve appreciated working with Co-Creat e and the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies because we feel they are aligned with our organizational values of humanity, community, growth, and restoration,” says Samantha Clausen-Ruppert, YWCA Advocacy & Grants Coordinator. “They balanced our staff’s needs and centered the people we serve in ways that are flexible, non-invasive, and with an intentional understanding of the impacts of race and power.”



YWCA Madison is also engaged with Co-Creat e through a grant from the Wisconsin Partnership Program at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health to evaluate their “Building Tech Skills, Opportunities, Wellness and Health for Returning Citizens” program.

Hilgendorf says high-quality research and data offer essential insights for nonprofit and community groups: “Co-Creat e is another opportunity to connect the university’s people and resources with community and nonprofit groups to answer tough questions and deliver meaningful, actionable information.”

---

***To learn more about Co-Create and the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies:***

- Visit: <https://commnsknowledge.wisc.edu/>
- Contact: Mary Beth Collins, J.D., M.A., Executive Director, at [mecollins@wisc.edu](mailto:mecollins@wisc.edu) or 608-890-0472
- Contact: Amy Washbush Hilgendorf, Associate Director for Engaged Research, at [ahilgendorf@wisc.edu](mailto:ahilgendorf@wisc.edu) or 608-712-5950