



A CAMPBELL PLAYBOOK

Nonprofit Program Design Guide

Design programs that are mission-aligned,
community-centered, and outcome-driven.

How to use this guide

Most programs are not designed. They accumulate. A funder asks for something, a board member suggests something else, a staff member carries forward what worked at a previous organization, and within two years there is a program nobody quite planned and nobody can quite explain.

This guide is a practical sequence for designing a program on purpose. It works for a new program, a program being rebuilt, and a program that runs well but cannot demonstrate what it achieves. Each step ends with the decision you should be able to make before moving on.

Move on when: If you cannot complete a step, that is the finding. Do not design past it.

STEP 01

Define the problem, not the program

Start with the condition you intend to change, stated plainly and narrowly enough to act on. “Youth need more support” is not a problem statement. “Ninth graders who fail two or more courses in the first semester rarely recover credit by the end of the year” is.

A usable problem statement names who is affected, what is happening to them, where and when it happens, and what it costs them. It should be specific enough that someone could disagree with it.

- Who experiences this problem, in what numbers?
- What evidence tells you it is real, rather than assumed?
- What already exists to address it, and where does that fall short?
- What happens if nothing changes?

Move on when: You can state the problem in two sentences, and point to evidence for each claim.

STEP 02

Understand the community you intend to serve

Programs fail more often from misreading the people they serve than from weak logic. The people closest to a problem usually understand its causes better than the organization designing around it.

Talk to them before you design, not after you pilot. A small number of structured conversations will surface barriers that no amount of internal planning will.

- What do participants say gets in the way — in their words, not yours?
- What have they already tried, and what happened?
- What would make participation realistic: timing, location, cost, childcare, language, trust?
- Who is excluded by the way you are planning to deliver this?

Move on when: You have heard directly from the people you intend to serve, and at least one design assumption changed as a result.

STEP 03

Name the outcome before the activity

An outcome is a change in a person or a condition. It is not a service you delivered or a number of people you reached. “Forty workshops delivered” is an output. “Participants recovered credit and returned for tenth grade” is an outcome.

Write the outcome first, then ask what would have to be true for it to happen. That question, asked repeatedly, produces the program.

- What will be different, for whom, by when?
- How much change is meaningful — and how much is realistic?
- Which outcomes are within your influence, and which depend on others?
- What would count as evidence that it happened?

Move on when: You can name one primary outcome and no more than three supporting ones.

STEP 04

Build the theory of change

A theory of change connects what you do to why you believe it will work. It is a chain of reasoning: these resources allow these activities, which produce these outputs, which lead to these outcomes, because of these assumptions.

The assumptions are the important part, and the part most often skipped. Every link in the chain rests on a belief about how change happens. Write those beliefs down where they can be examined.

- Inputs: staff, funding, partners, facilities, materials, time.

- Activities: what the program actually does, described so an outsider could picture it.
- Outputs: the countable results of those activities.
- Outcomes: short, medium and long term change.
- Assumptions: what must be true for each link to hold.

Move on when: Someone outside the organization can read the chain and follow the logic without you narrating it.

STEP 05

Design the program model

The model is the operational answer to the theory of change. It specifies dosage, sequence, staffing and setting with enough precision that two different sites would deliver recognisably the same program.

Vagueness here is what produces programs that work in one location and not another. If the design does not say how often, for how long, and delivered by whom, those decisions will be made differently by every person who runs it.

- Dosage: how often, how long, over what period?
- Sequence: what happens first, and why does order matter?
- Staffing: who delivers it, with what qualifications and what training?
- Setting: where does it happen, and what does that require?
- Referral and intake: how do participants arrive, and who is eligible?
- Fidelity: which elements are essential, and which may be adapted locally?

Move on when: The model is written down, and the essential elements are distinguished from the adaptable ones.

STEP 06

Decide how you will measure, before you launch

Measurement designed after launch measures whatever happens to be available. Measurement designed alongside the program measures what matters.

Choose a small number of indicators you will actually collect. Three measures gathered consistently are worth more than twelve gathered occasionally.

- What is the baseline, before the program begins?
- Which indicators track outputs, and which track outcomes?
- Who collects each measure, using what instrument, at what interval?
- Where does the data live, and who reviews it?
- What result would tell you the program is not working?

Move on when: Every indicator has a named owner, a collection method, and a schedule.

STEP 07

Resource it honestly

The most common cause of program failure is a design that assumes more capacity than the organization has. Budget the real cost, including the staff time that rarely appears in a proposal: supervision, data entry, partner coordination, reporting.

- What does one unit of service genuinely cost, fully loaded?
- Which staff roles does this require, at what share of their time?
- What happens to this program when the founding staff member leaves?
- Is the funding aligned to the program's actual duration, or to a grant cycle?

Move on when: The budget reflects the model as designed, not the model as you hope to afford it.

STEP 08

Pilot, learn, adjust

Run the program small before running it fully. A pilot is not a soft launch; it is a test with questions attached and a decision point at the end.

Decide in advance what you are testing, what evidence would cause you to change the design, and when you will make that call.

- What are the two or three questions this pilot must answer?

- How long will it run, and how many participants are enough to learn from?
- What will you do differently if the answer is no?
- Who decides whether to continue, adapt, or stop?

Move on when: The pilot has a written question, an end date, and a named decision-maker.

Readiness checklist

Before a program moves from design into delivery, every line below should be true.

■	The problem statement names who, what, where, and what it costs.	Step 01
■	Evidence supports the problem statement, rather than assumption.	Step 01
■	People with lived experience of the problem were consulted before design.	Step 02
■	At least one design assumption changed as a result of those conversations.	Step 02
■	One primary outcome is named, with no more than three supporting outcomes.	Step 03
■	Outcomes describe change in people or conditions, not services delivered.	Step 03
■	The theory of change is written, including its assumptions.	Step 04
■	Dosage, sequence, staffing and setting are specified.	Step 05
■	Essential elements are distinguished from locally adaptable ones.	Step 05
■	A baseline exists, or a plan to establish one.	Step 06
■	Every indicator has an owner, a method, and a schedule.	Step 06
■	The budget reflects fully loaded cost, including supervision and reporting.	Step 07
■	The program survives the departure of any single staff member.	Step 07
■	The pilot has a written question, an end date, and a decision-maker.	Step 08

Five ways program design goes wrong

Designing to the funding. The grant shapes the program rather than the problem. The program ends when the grant does, having never been the thing the community needed.

Confusing activity with outcome. Reporting counts participants and sessions, because those are easy to gather, and never establishes whether anything changed.

Skipping the assumptions. The logic chain looks sound but rests on an untested belief — that people will travel, that partners will refer, that attendance equals engagement.

Designing for the average participant. The model works for the person in the middle and excludes the people with the highest need, who are usually the reason the program exists.

Launching at full scale. There is no pilot, so the first cohort absorbs every design flaw, and the organization learns in public.

Where CAMPBELL comes in

Program design is not a document exercise. It is a sequence of decisions, each of which is easier to make well before a program exists than after it has been running for two years.

CAMPBELL works with organizations on exactly this sequence — needs assessment, program models and logic frameworks, theory of change, and implementation planning. If you are designing a new program, rebuilding one that has drifted, or trying to show a funder what a program achieves, we can help.