Harnessing Evaluation and Learning for Equity and Impact

INSIGHTS FOR FOUNDATION EXECUTIVES

OCTOBER 2022
Evaluation and learning (E&L) practices and approaches hold enormous, untapped potential to help foundations understand and respond to community and grantee needs, inform how foundations approach strategy, and improve effectiveness, including the advancement of equity.

Grantmaking foundations are increasingly using E&L functions in diverse ways. A 2019 survey from the Center for Evaluation Innovation found that 42 percent of foundations had a dedicated E&L unit or department that functioned separately from the program department, up from 34 percent in 2015.\(^1\)

The survey also shows that E&L staff fill numerous and evolving roles including directing and managing evaluation work within the foundation; supporting broader team and organizational learning efforts, including equity work; supporting strategy development and review; and providing advice or coaching about evaluation to other staff.\(^2\) Beyond the foundation’s walls, many E&L teams contribute to the fields of evaluation and philanthropy by sharing actionable knowledge or learning strategies with peer organizations. Field-building increases the influence and impact of a foundation by helping to advance philanthropic thought leadership and E&L practices more broadly.

But leveraging the power of evaluation and learning is easier said than done. This guide is a resource for foundation executives interested in harnessing the power of evaluation and learning for impact. It was developed by Engage R+D with support from The James Irvine Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Center for Evaluation Innovation, and Kresge Foundation. It is based on our study of the E&L function across these three diverse foundations, all of which champion the Equitable Evaluation Initiative and are on their own equity journeys.

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This brief includes an overview of why foundation leadership is essential to the success of E&L functions, how CEOs and presidents can help position E&L for success, and a checklist CEOs and presidents can use to gauge their foundation’s commitment to E&L.

**Foundations’ approaches to E&L matter to advancing equity and shifting power.**

Society is at crucial junctures in addressing racial justice, equity, health and economic crises, and climate change, among many other essential issues. We need innovation and reinvention—not only in the social sector but also in our civic infrastructure more broadly. Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to play a significant role, bringing expertise and learning to support progress.

At the same time, in this era of what Eric Liu of Citizen University has called the “Great Push Back” against all forms of institutional power, foundations are challenged to examine their positions and relationships within the systems they wish to improve. For some, this means becoming more equitable, transparent, and responsive to those they seek to benefit. A rising demand for community voice is pressing philanthropy to become more accountable to grantees and communities, and not view accountability as only the other way around.

Case studies across diverse foundations navigating these shifts confirm that with necessary support from CEOs and presidents, **E&L functions can serve as key partners in helping foundations innovate and improve**, advancing the inquiries, conversations, and actions taking place. As foundations increasingly examine diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within their walls as well as their influence on DEI through grantmaking, E&L teams can be an asset to equity-related reflection and growth. (See sidebar: Reimagining Evaluation to Contribute to Equity).

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E&L FUNCTIONS: REAPING THEIR FULL BENEFIT

The E&L unit at foundations can facilitate the implementation of evaluation and learning in the organization’s work. However making E&L practices routine and meaningful also requires commitment from executive leadership and staff outside of the E&L team.

**Two major criteria can help a foundation to fully reap the benefits of evaluations:**

1. designing evaluations to inform broader learning and decisions, and
2. having an organizational structure and culture that enables interrogation of existing practices and approaches, creating an environment where staff can apply lessons learned.

CEOs and presidents must take active roles in embracing reflection, evidence-based change, and multi-culturally valid inquiry. Although learning and evaluation can surface tensions, as a powerful lever for change in the organization, leadership can help create the conditions for healthy tension that encourages dialogue and innovation. In addition, E&L units are sometimes seen as a team of specialists whose operations are independent of foundation strategy and leadership. However, E&L is more effective when integrated into foundation practices and culture.

Specifically, E&L will do more for a foundation if the CEO or president strengthens these factors:

- **Structures for communication and building understanding.** Regular communication between the E&L leader and the CEO or president (as well as with program and communications staff) builds common understanding of priorities, coordination of practices, and E&L’s role in advancing the foundation’s goals as well as the broader field.

- **Support for E&L practices and a learning culture.** The work of evaluation and learning is not limited to the E&L team; it takes broad ownership and engagement across the foundation. The CEO’s or president’s leadership in conveying the importance of E&L, in part by providing resources and infrastructure to support E&L practices, sets the stage for program-specific and foundation-wide decisions to make effective use of E&L assets and the lessons they generate.

- **Shifting power to communities.** A rising focus on equity is shifting some foundations’ interest towards supporting community-driven priorities and strategies, with grantees and community leaders at the decision-making table and as partners in E&L. The CEO or president has a role in supporting grantee voice and partnership in E&L, with openness to the time investment needed and to redefined processes and outcomes. The CEO can help board members, in particular, broaden what they see as valid, rigorous, or objective to include considerations of equity and context.

Making E&L work well for a foundation requires time, resources, and ongoing executive support. However the payoff can be substantial—an E&L function can help drive learning and improvement, strengthen impact, deepen partnership with grantees and communities, and advance more equitable practices and results. The deep dive on the next page illustrates how foundation CEOs and presidents can help position E&L functions for success.

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HOW CAN CEOS AND PRESIDENTS POSITION E&L FUNCTIONS FOR SUCCESS?

**What does this look like?**

**Support strategic involvement of the E&L leader with the CEO and board.**

E&L can more effectively inform and improve the foundation’s efforts if the E&L team clearly understands executive and board priorities. The E&L leader works intimately with all program areas and, supported by a strong connection to the CEO and board, carries the capacity to align program staff to the mission and maximize impact. Regular communications between the E&L leader and the CEO, executive team, and board can also strengthen ties between foundation goals and E&L work, build mutual understanding of E&L priorities and tradeoffs, and better inform executive decisions about resourcing E&L.

**Resource E&L across the foundation.**

An E&L function requires resources in the form of budget, staffing, and technology (to efficiently and effectively capture data). Our research suggests that E&L teams are most effective when given their own budget for flexible co-investment in evaluations and field-building activities, alongside that of program staff. At the same time, expecting program budgets to include E&L resources to support program-based learning and adaptation reinforces productive relationships between E&L and program teams.

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**What can I do to support this?**

As CEO or president, you can establish **routine meetings with the E&L leader** to discuss how evaluations can inform your learning priorities and decision points. You might also set expectations with the board and the E&L leader that foster a norm of **learning at the board level** and establish an E&L role in **the foundation’s oversight of strategy and grantmaking**. This strategic involvement serves to maximize the E&L team’s knowledge of board and executive needs for information and, in turn, the ability of the E&L leader to share useful findings that can inform foundation decisions.

As CEO or president, you can **give E&L teams some budget authority** in evaluation, allowing them to pursue efforts that take planning, continuity, and analysis across programs (such as a deep look into equity, grantee feedback, and community partnership practices) and separate program evaluations. In addition to directly supporting the E&L function, you can set expectations and provide resources in the form of program staff time dedicated to evaluation and learning across the organization, demonstrating a foundation-wide commitment to engaging in and applying learning. Designating **program and other staff time for evaluation tasks and learning activities** signals your commitment to learning and recognizes the reflection, synthesis, and planning that must occur to apply evaluation lessons to the foundation’s work.

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6 Beer T. July 2020. Re-Thinking How We Work with Boards on Evaluation and Learning. Center for Evaluation Innovation. Available at www.evaluationinnovation.org/presentation/across-the-board-contradictions%e2%80%8b-re-aligning-foundation-trustees-to-incentivize-learning%e2%80%8b/
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WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Cultivate a culture of learning and equity beyond the E&L unit.

E&L can more fully benefit the foundation if the organization’s culture embraces learning and innovation. Evaluation findings have far less impact if viewed primarily as historical records instead of guidance for the future. An organization oriented to examine what is and is not working for the purposes of improvement is primed to take advantage of what E&L offers. E&L is also integral to a foundation’s equity work. Like learning, promoting equity takes foundation-wide effort, including continuous listening and adaptation, rather than residing solely in the E&L unit. With resources and support, however, E&L teams can use their learning skills to advance more equitable foundation practices.

WHAT CAN I DO TO SUPPORT THIS?

As CEO or president, you can cultivate a culture of learning, looking to the E&L team as a resource in the foundation’s broader efforts. Both formal and informal structures in the organization affect learning. Regarding formal structure, you can encourage E&L’s integration into foundation practices so that learning—with equity at its core—is built in, for example by having E&L staff sit on program teams, embedding learning activities in existing staff meetings, communicating actionable lessons as part of every team’s routine process, or recruiting board members with E&L experience and lived experience in the communities you serve. Embedding E&L into annual budgeting and planning processes is a key step to support this integration. You might also communicate and model to all staff that their responsibilities center listening and learning. Such listening and learning can be a day-to-day effort that helps to unravel inequitable power dynamics, and to allow staff to reflect upon, apply, and share knowledge. In terms of informal structure, you can influence interest in learning through promotion of the E&L mission to facilitate effectiveness and impact, emphasizing E&L’s role in assisting staff in being successful in their roles. Your endorsement can foster healthy tension between learning and accountability by positioning E&L as a supporter of programs, not as an arbiter of a strategy’s value or a judge of a body of work. You can also demonstrate openness to the vulnerability of learning and unlearning by sharing your own experiences with reflecting on evidence and using lessons for improvement.

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The tool on the next page offers a checklist you can use to assess your foundation’s commitment to evaluation and learning, identify strengths, and zero in on constructive actions to take. It could be valuable to walk through this checklist with your E&L team. For more in-depth ideas, including on addressing obstacles to E&L effectiveness, see our expanded guide, Evaluation & Learning at Foundations: A Field Guide.

While the checklist of actions offers concrete starting points, becoming a learning organization that promotes equity involves long-term, incremental shifts to organizational structure, culture, and function, far beyond adopting a few simple practices. Approaches are still emerging, but additional resources you may find useful include:

- A small number of organizations, most notably the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the Center for Evaluation Innovation, and FSG, have developed guidance for foundation staff and board members on E&L, including tools and case examples.

- The organization Equity in the Center, with its seminal publication, Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture, provides research-based guidance on shifting organizational culture. Foundation leadership is essential to the success of evaluation and learning. In turn, evaluation and learning can support the organization’s impact and, critically, its readiness for whatever the future brings.

“IT’S A DANGER IF AN ORGANIZATION WANTED TO LOCATE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING JUST WITHIN THE EVALUATION TEAM, OR JUST WITHIN ANY TEAM. YOU’RE AT RISK OF TEAM MEMBERS ABDICATING THEIR RESPONSIBILITY AROUND LEARNING.”

– KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION LEADER

This brief can be used as a standalone document to support foundation executives in integrating evaluation and learning into their organizations. It also serves as a companion piece to Evaluation & Learning at Foundations: A Field Guide, which offers practical guidance and advice to E&L leaders at foundations. Both documents can be found at https://www.engagerd.com/feature/el-foundations. Together, these two resources can help foundation teams to fully harness the power of evaluation and learning to support strategy, equity, and impact.
# Effective Evaluation & Learning: A Checklist for Foundation CEOs and Presidents

Use this checklist to gauge your foundation’s commitment to evaluation and learning (E&L) and opportunities to strengthen its impact.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we do</th>
<th>Why we do it</th>
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<td><strong>Support strategic involvement of E&amp;L</strong></td>
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| - Our E&L leader is part of the leadership team, with a similar level of authority as other leaders.  
- Our E&L leader or team routinely meets with the CEO or president.  
- Our E&L leader or team attends board meetings.  
- Our E&L function is positioned to have agency and influence over organization-wide learning practices. |  |
| - The E&L perspective can best support and inform the foundation’s work with understanding of and equal involvement in big picture planning and decisions.  
- Regular communication helps align E&L with executive priorities.  
- Understanding board questions and concerns informs E&L.  
- To facilitate learning, E&L needs authority to drive learning practices throughout the foundation. |  |
| **Provide a range of E&L resources across the foundation** |  |
| - Our E&L leader feels sufficiently resourced with dollars, staffing, and technology to fulfill the E&L functions our foundation has prioritized.  
- Our E&L function manages its own budget with flexible resources to support E&L opportunities that arise.  
- We designate resources for learning across the foundation. All staff engage in capturing, reflecting on, applying, and sharing knowledge. |  |
| - Supporting diverse E&L needs, facilitating learning and equity work, and field building takes resources and capacity.  
- The E&L team is more responsive and proactive when it has some decision-making authority even if program staff determine much of the evaluation spending.  
- Effective E&L relies on routine participation of all staff, which is much more likely if resourced and articulated as a responsibility of each staff member. |  |
| **Cultivate a culture of learning and equity beyond the E&L unit** |  |
| - Our CEO or president communicates support of E&L to our staff and board.  
- Our board of directors includes members with E&L experience in a philanthropic context.  
- Our executive leaders model listening and learning, embed learning practices, and set expectations for staff to apply and share learning.  
- Our commitment to equity is foundation wide and shows up in how we work both internally and externally.  
- Our equity commitment is carried by staff across many different roles, and avoids reliance on staff members of color alone to shoulder this work. |  |
| - Influential champions of E&L build commitment to evidence-based learning across the foundation.  
- The board is more effective when it makes informed inquiries; understands evaluation findings, limitations, and opportunities; and is open to learning.  
- Leadership, built-in practices, an ethos of listening, knowledge sharing, and staff accountability are important components of an integrated learning culture.  
- The E&L function is integral to equity efforts, but responsibility to advance equity and act on learning to shift existing norms extends across the organization. |
ABOUT ENGAGE R+D

Engage R+D is dedicated to helping organizations achieve their greatest possible impact. We partner with leading foundations, nonprofits, and public agencies throughout the U.S. to help them design, implement, measure, and improve their work. We believe that creating social change and advancing equity requires bringing together good data, stakeholder voice, and field insights in creative ways to inform strategy and drive results. We approach our work with an organizational development lens, recognizing that people and relationships are central to this work. We also exchange ideas and share insights with the broader field so that together we can create a more just and equitable future.

IMPETUS FOR THE BRIEF

In philanthropy today, evaluation and learning are indispensable in advancing foundation culture, strategy, and practice, particularly in light of broad social changes and growing expectations of philanthropy’s role in advancing equity. This brief and the companion guide fill a gap in the knowledge and tools available by providing guidance and advice to E&L leaders and foundation executives. These products are based on in-depth case studies of the Irvine, Kauffman, and Kresge Foundations along with our own experience partnering with foundations on evaluation, strategy, and learning efforts.

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