



Evaluation and Learning at Foundations

A FIELD GUIDE
APRIL 2022

DEAR PARTNERS,

We are delighted you are opening this guide.

We feel privileged to walk alongside you in your journey as a learning and evaluation leader and are rooting for you!

When this guide was first conceptualized, we had no idea how much the world would change in a short amount of time—how the inequities and injustices of our world—and indeed our sector—would be laid bare.

This paradigm-shifting moment is ripe with opportunities for us to reimagine the way we understand the world around us and our relationship to it. It offers an opportunity to double down in our pursuit of equity and justice, and to innovate across all of our philanthropic approaches and practices. This moment calls for us to engage honestly and humbly with the communities we serve. The role of learning and evaluation is central to this goal—which is all about reimagining our work in service of equity and justice.

At The Kresge Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffmann Foundation, and James Irvine Foundation, we are taking up this charge with joy, tenacity, and humility. We are asking ourselves hard questions, making our thinking visible, and dreaming—alongside our partners—on how to advance a more just and equitable world. There is no one road map for this work. In fact, one of the reasons we're excited that you're reading this guide is because this is the kind of guide we wish we would've had when starting our own journeys in learning and evaluation in philanthropy.

While each of our foundations is unique in its focus, approaches, and ways of working, we are seeing how we as learning and evaluation leaders can support our organizations in becoming institutions where our equity aspirations are aligned with our institutional

practices. We can help philanthropy to learn and unlearn; to make sure that listening to communities is at the core of our work; to acknowledge and apply multiple ways of knowing; to consider the ways institutions, policies, systems, and history contribute to inequities; and to ensure that our institutions are accountable to our partners and to our equity commitments.

The good news is that we're not doing this work alone! There are—and have been—myriads of folks who have contributed to our thinking, pushed the sector in innumerable ways and have laid the groundwork for us to work collectively towards a stronger, more equitable and just sector.

The three foundations highlighted in this guide are committed to advancing racial equity. In our foundations' respective equity journeys, we have all been inspired by, and have benefited from, the work of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI). EEI invites us to reimagine the purpose and practice of evaluation and expand our notions of validity, objectivity, and rigor. It invites us to embrace complexity and to align all of our philanthropic tools in service of equity. It offers an Equitable Evaluation Framework™ with principles to apply in our practice. As foundations across the country take positions on equity and launch equity statements,

EEI has been at the forefront of helping the sector reimagine its existing evaluation approaches. Much of where our three institutions are in thinking about and reshaping evaluative practices is on account of the important work of EEI as well as other Black and Indigenous evaluators and strategists who are at the forefront of this important work.

We hope this guide provides you with practical guidance and serves as a source of inspiration. And, we invite you to join us in seeing the critical role that learning and evaluation can play in our collective pursuit of equity and justice.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ACruz'.

Anna Cruz
Managing Director,
Strategic Learning,
Research & Evaluation
The Kresge Foundation



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Ammann Howard'.

Dr. Kim Ammann Howard
Director of Impact
Assessment and Learning
James Irvine Foundation



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Mindnich'.

Dr. Jessica Mindnich
Senior Director of Evaluation
**Ewing Marion
Kauffman Foundation**

WELCOME

We're just guessing: Leading evaluation and learning at a foundation wasn't precisely the career you dreamed of when you were a kid.

But maybe it should have been.

The role of leading evaluation and learning (E&L) is filled with challenge, vitality, and opportunity to champion ideals and principles you care about. You are charged with supporting the foundation's work and values in fundamental ways. It's an exciting and meaningful prospect.

But how does that work take shape for you in your specific position at your particular foundation?

Whether you are new to the role or a seasoned E&L leader, at least one thing is clear: your job requires flexibility and skill to handle a dynamic and complicated work environment.

To navigate your E&L leadership role, you need knowledge and support, yet you may find that these are sometimes in short supply. You may report to people

who lack experience in the areas that encompass your position. Existing literature may not feel relevant to the immediate challenges you face. If you are an evaluator of color, the intersections of your experience may add layers of opportunity and challenge within this complex role.

You might be new to working in philanthropy or lack connections to peers who hold similar positions. Or, you might be a more experienced leader navigating new challenges and opportunities in the context of a dynamic organization and shifting philanthropic field.

These circumstances provided the impetus for this guide. Our team at Engage R+D created this guide as a culminating product of our study of the E&L function at three diverse

foundations, exploring core questions that E&L leaders routinely confront and manage in the context of their work.

The pages ahead shed light on opportunities, complexities, and tradeoffs E&L leaders face across the field.

They provide **field-based considerations**, whether you are a new or seasoned E&L leader navigating your role, and **practical tools** for developing or strengthening a foundation's E&L function.

Parts of this guide are also highly relevant to foundation executives, managers, and program staff.

WHY A GUIDE FOR EVALUATION AND LEARNING LEADERS?

Evaluation and learning play important and increasingly diverse roles at grantmaking foundations.

As an E&L leader, you are part of a substantial and growing contingent in philanthropy: a 2020 report from the Center for Evaluation Innovation found that 42 percent of foundations with at least \$10 million in annual giving had a dedicated E&L unit or department that functioned separately from the program department, up from 34 percent in 2015.¹ While the report found that 40 percent of foundations' evaluation staff are people of color, evaluation leadership is still predominately white.

42% ↑ **up from 34% in 2015**

Percentage of foundations with at least \$10m in annual giving in 2019 that had a dedicated E&L unit or separate department

As you undoubtedly see first-hand, staff within these departments play many roles, including directing and managing evaluation work within the foundation, providing advice or coaching about evaluation to other staff, hiring and managing third parties to conduct evaluations, and supporting learning more broadly within the organization. This same study also points to expansion in both expectations and scope for these functions beyond these core roles to include strategic planning, group facilitation, constituent engagement, communications support, and capacity-building.

You are also joining the evolving field of philanthropy in which supporting learning and impact is critically important. Indeed, society is at crucial junctures in addressing racial justice, health and economic crises, and climate change, among many other essential

issues. Innovation and reinvention are greatly needed—not only in the social sector but also in our civic infrastructure more broadly.² Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to play a critical role, bringing expertise and resources to support progress. However, 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 adapt their practices and ways of working to be more transparent, responsive, and accountable to those they seek to benefit. We believe that evaluation and learning can serve as the idea and experimentation lab of philanthropy, helping to advance the inquiries, conversations, and actions taking place.

We've created this guide to help you find a route to relevance and effectiveness in the current transformative context.

¹ Center for Evaluation Innovation. January 2020. Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices 2020. Available at https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/cei_benchmarking2020/

² See, for example, Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century by the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship.

DEVELOPMENT OF THIS GUIDE

Although the E&L function is tailored to each foundation, common experiences and challenges can shed light on useful strategies for E&L leaders in a wide range of contexts.

Developing and managing an E&L function demands considerations of how priorities and contextual factors can create an environment for success. To gather a range of insider perspectives, we employed a multi-case study design to learn how E&L takes shape at several foundations.

Through 25 in-depth interviews with staff at three foundations—Ewing Marion Kauffman, James Irvine, and Kresge—we explored the leadership and mechanics of E&L functions, their accomplishments, and opportunities and challenges for integrating E&L into each foundation’s other work. All three champion the Equitable Evaluation Initiative and are on their own equity journeys.³ Insights from these interviews informed the guidance included in this document. We include specific examples and quotes from the three foundations in order to bring the issues discussed to life.⁴

In addition, we conducted a literature review of foundation E&L practices, gathered additional insights through learning sessions and conversations with E&L leaders, and drew from our firm’s own longstanding experience partnering with foundation leaders to support evaluation, strategy, learning, and equity.

Caveats about applying our learnings

First, while the three foundation E&L functions that we spotlighted represent different models for E&L functions, all three have invested internal infrastructure and staffing in evaluation and learning, with E&L teams rather than a solo E&L director. We did not include any smaller foundations without formal E&L departments. Nonetheless, we believe the lessons from these foundations hold relevance for staff leading more lightly resourced functions as well.

Second, our profiles of these three foundations are representative of their goals and approaches at the time of our interviews (mid-to-late 2020), with several more recent reflections of their evolving equity work in a rapidly shifting field.

³ Equitable Evaluation Initiative. <https://www.equitableeval.org/>

⁴ Quotes in this document have been edited slightly for clarity and brevity.



SOURCES

The following sources informed this guide:

- Case study interviews and supporting documents about evaluation and learning functions at the Ewing Marion Kauffman, James Irvine, and Kresge Foundations;
- A literature review of foundation E&L practices;
- Learning sessions and conversations with E&L leaders; and
- Our longstanding experience partnering with foundations to support evaluation, strategy, and learning.

HOW TO USE THE GUIDE

Evaluation and Learning at Foundations: Field Guide

speaks most directly to both new and seasoned E&L leaders at foundations.

It is also likely of interest to **evaluation consultants** whose work with foundations could benefit from a deeper understanding of the inner workings of philanthropy, and foundation **executives** interested in developing a deeper understanding of how to support or strengthen an E&L function. A special section also addresses foundation **management and program staff** regarding how to be an E&L ally.

We have designed the guide as a reference and set of resources, with sections and tools to be used selectively without the need to read from cover to cover. The guide is organized as follows:

Section 1, “Stepping into E&L Leadership” (pages 5-19) lays out considerations for those starting a new job as an E&L leader, including guidance for reflecting upon the of purpose of E&L,

organizational context, and priority-setting.

Section 2, “Relevance and Effectiveness in a Dynamic Context” (pages 20-41) provides insights for both new and seasoned E&L leaders, including managing common tensions that arise, growing influence, promoting learning and equity, and managing E&L’s role amidst a shifting philanthropic context.

Section 3, “Building Your Path Forward” (pages 42-44) shares some concluding thoughts on developing as an E&L leader within the unique context of an organization.

Section 4, “Appendices” (pages 45-49) includes acknowledgments, a list of interview participants, and additional resources for exploring the topics in this guide more deeply.

In addition, the icons below are dispersed throughout the guide, indicating deeper dives into relevant content from each section (i.e., case profiles, infographics, equity considerations, and other insights); tools that you can apply directly to your work; and questions to use as prompts for reflection.





Stepping into Evaluation and Learning Leadership

SECTION ONE

STARTING A JOB AS AN E&L LEADER

You've come into a job leading your foundation's evaluation and learning function: **Congratulations!**

As someone who deeply values data and learning, you've landed an influential position that promises to be an ongoing opportunity for growth and development as you also support E&L efforts in partnership with your colleagues.

Starting any new job entails a steep learning curve as you become familiar with the work environment, goals and incentives, and daily mechanics. With a complex, dynamic job like leading E&L, understanding those parameters and opportunities can require a heavy lift and ongoing attention.

This section of the guide is designed to help you consider different aspects of your position and organization and how they will affect your priorities and strategies.

It also can help you determine what further information you need to seek out to be prepared and effective as an E&L leader.

ARE YOU LEADING A NEW E&L DEPARTMENT?

There are differences between becoming an E&L leader of an existing department versus managing a brand-new E&L function. Although most considerations in this guide should apply to both cases, developing a new E&L function will bring more opportunities to influence design decisions about structure and purpose. It also means you will likely need more time to produce evaluation findings or see the fruits of learning; creating an E&L function is far more involved than flipping a switch.

TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER

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Purpose of the E&L function

pg 9

Organizational elements that effect the E&L function

pg 14

Determining priorities in a complex setting

Purpose of the E&L function

Although E&L functions often see foundation staff and trustees as the primary consumers of their work, the central purpose of that work differs from foundation to foundation⁵.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation and learning, these functions have different goals and serve varied roles depending on a foundation's mission, strategy, integration of equity, and organizational culture. Because many stakeholders make requests of an E&L team with limited capacity, **clarity of purpose is key to guiding your priorities.**

In other words, you need to understand the purpose of the E&L function in order to lead the E&L team to fulfill it, often by making choices about which of multiple avenues to pursue.

Furthermore, how your E&L purpose aligns with the goals of your stakeholders provides opportunities to build relationships and cultivate support for E&L practices.

Across foundations, E&L departments work towards similar goals but often differ in how they articulate their purpose and what they prioritize.

Evaluation and learning functions have different goals and serve varied roles depending on a foundation's mission, strategy and organizational culture. Clarity of purpose is key to guiding your priorities.

⁵ Beer, T., Patrizi, P., & Coffman, J. (2021). Holding Foundations Accountable for Equity Commitments. *The Foundation Review*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1565>

The following grid outlines examples of how the three foundations we studied articulate their E&L purpose and identifies alignment with different audiences.

EXAMPLE PURPOSES OF THE E&L FUNCTION

Possible E&L purpose	Real-life example	Alignment with various audiences
SUPPORT LEARNING AND STRATEGY AND STRATEGY ADAPTATION	According to its Impact Assessment and Learning Framework, the purpose of the James Irvine Foundation's Impact Assessment and Learning department includes helping the staff and board advance the foundation's goals by guiding strategy and grantmaking, as well as supporting accountability and transparency. ⁶	For CEO and trustees , this purpose aligns with the foundation's mission and uses learning to improve impact. For program staff , this purpose reinforces opportunities for continuous learning and adjustment.
PROVIDE ACTIONABLE EVIDENCE ABOUT IMPACT	A purpose of the Kauffman Foundation's evaluation department, as articulated in the department's 2018-2020 strategic plan, is to be a strong partner in moving forward the work of every program area by producing actionable evidence about grants, programs, and strategies.	For CEO and trustees , this purpose met a desire to use rigorous data to inform investment decisions. For program staff , evaluation could take on the role of partner in supporting continuous quality improvement.
FACILITATE A LEARNING CULTURE IN SUPPORT OF EQUITY	At the Kresge Foundation , a 2019 trustee orientation document to the Strategic Learning, Research, and Evaluation department identifies "strengthening organizational practices to ensure we apply lessons and adapt with a commitment to Equitable Evaluation Framework™ principles" as a core purpose. ⁷	For CEO and trustees , this purpose supports effectiveness of mission-driven work and promotes shared values among staff and community. For program staff , an E&L focus on learning and unlearning emphasizes openness and improvement rather than accountability and monitoring.



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: PURPOSE

What do you understand as the purpose of your foundation's E&L role?

How does equity show up in your purpose?

Who specifically do you see as key stakeholders for E&L work at your foundation?

In what ways does your purpose suggest common ground with those stakeholders?

⁶ The James Irvine Foundation's Impact Assessment and Learning Framework. <https://www.irvine.org/our-approach/impact-assessment-learning/approach/>

⁷ Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework> © 2020 *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. All Rights Reserved. EQUITABLE EVALUATION INITIATIVE and the EEI logo are trademarks of the Seattle Foundation. EQUITABLE EVALUATION is a trademark of jdcPartnerships LLC dba Luminare Group.

Organizational elements that affect the E&L function

How your E&L function is situated within the foundation in terms of its structure, relationships to other parts of the organization, and resources affects how it operates.

Not only are elements of formal structure (e.g., chain of command, budget authority, staffing) important to understand, but also elements of informal structure (e.g., relationships and influence of the E&L team), which may take time to grasp as you develop an intuitive sense of your context as an E&L leader.

In addition, the existence of a strong culture of learning—or lack of it—can make the role of E&L a more natural or challenging fit within the foundation. A supportive network of peers outside your organization can be an essential resource and is another important set of relationships to develop early in your tenure as an E&L leader.

The following descriptions and resources are designed to help you build your awareness of organizational and external elements that will influence your approach to leading E&L.

Structure and relationships

Getting a handle on current roles of E&L within different aspects of the foundation's work will give you a picture of how E&L staff time is spent, how well it aligns with the overall purpose of E&L, and where the E&L function is working well or needs adjustment. Further, understanding not only the priorities of the person you report to, but the interests and expectations of other stakeholders is an early task for a new E&L leader. One E&L leader shared a

cautionary tale from a previous job they had held, noting,

“One mistake I made is I didn’t get a clear vision and bring that to [the CEO] early. I thought my audience was the program directors because I wasn’t reporting to [the CEO]. It’s important to get that buy-in and understand what the CEO needs as the leader of the foundation. What are their questions and curiosities? What are they hearing from the board?”

Familiarizing yourself with the structure and historical relationships of the E&L function can help you identify opportunities to build your own working relationships and consider using your leadership as a chance for a fresh start or new ideas where needed. You may have started in your E&L leadership role as part of a shift in how E&L is applied within your foundation or even as part of a broader package of programming shifts.

In addition, E&L leaders commonly experience skepticism from staff who may be unsure how E&L can benefit their work and feel the pressure of competing priorities. At the same time, it is important to help staff see that you are in a leadership role in which you are weaving a thread of evaluation and learning throughout different aspects of the foundation's work, rather than as merely a service provider supporting the work of program staff. Taking stock of how supportive of E&L your colleagues are can help you determine how to approach next steps. Tuning into past lessons and current priorities will help you navigate relationships effectively.

E&L's position: Structural and relationship considerations when starting the job

Stakeholder	What to know about structure	What to know about relationships
EXECUTIVE STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who the E&L leader reports to at the foundation How E&L is represented at strategy and executive-level meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CEO's E&L priorities CEO's view of equity within the organization and in the foundation's work E&L interests and perspectives of other executive staff
BOARD OF TRUSTEES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E&L leaders' opportunities to interface with the board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trustees' E&L interests and commitment to equity
PROGRAM STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E&L's role with regard to programs E&L's opportunities related to staff engagement in equity efforts Whether E&L staff attend program team meetings (routinely/occasionally/never) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How program staff view E&L (e.g., as a partner vs. auditor vs. hindrance; as a resource for their team vs. a service provider) Program-level E&L interests internally and with grantees and other external stakeholders Primacy of community knowledge and priorities in program approaches
GRANTEES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whether E&L staff have direct interaction with grantees, in what capacity, and how coordination works with program staff Existing use of equity-oriented evaluation practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grantee interests related to E&L and possibilities for collaboration in the context of how the foundation partners with grantees Level of grantee and community trust in the foundation
CONSULTANTS AND COLLABORATORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundation use of external resources for evaluation, technical assistance, learning facilitation, or other E&L-related services E&L team's role in these engagements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types of consultation needed (e.g., advice on RFP/Q development, equity efforts, conducting evaluations, proposal review and selection) How engagements with consultants and collaborators have been viewed by staff and why
COMMUNICATIONS STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interface with communications staff E&L's role in informing the field and other efforts external to the foundation Communications staff role in internal and external equity efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communications staff perspectives on sharing E&L findings and external learning

Outside network

Typically, leaders of E&L functions report to a member of the executive team or CEO who is not an evaluator by training and lacks in-depth knowledge of what it is like to lead such a role. While such individuals can be incredible leaders, supervisors, and mentors, they are not always the best source of ideas and guidance when it comes to managing the strategic and operational aspects of the E&L position. To compensate for this, many E&L leaders work to cultivate a strong network of relationships with peers outside their own foundation. Such individuals provide a community of support and can serve as sounding boards and sources of E&L strategy ideas.

Many opportunities exist to meet and network with other E&L leaders, who can serve as both information resources and sources of support on your journey. These opportunities include roundtables, conferences, and other gatherings hosted by organizations such as the Center for Evaluation Innovation, Equitable Evaluation Initiative, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and the American Evaluation Association's Nonprofit and Foundations Topical

Interest Group.^{8, 9, 10, 11} In recent years, a variety of regional and other affinity networks have also emerged. These vary in terms of focus, size, frequency with which they meet, and degree of formality.

It can be helpful to ask around to explore what networks exist; you may also consider starting one on your own.

In addition to building relationships with other E&L leaders, connections with consultants and other foundation professionals can provide additional perspective on the field of philanthropy. While it takes time and effort to build a professional network, being connected and in community with others who share similar aspirations and values can be tremendously rewarding and helpful as you navigate your role.

Connections with consultants and other foundation professionals can provide additional perspective on the field of philanthropy.

Resources for external evaluation

Understanding how external evaluations are funded is key to grasping your leverage in determining E&L activities and building a learning culture and support for evaluation within your organization. Although having an evaluation budget separate from program budgets provides you with greater authority in spending decisions, there can be pros and cons to different configurations.¹²

Many opportunities exist to meet and network with other E&L leaders, who can serve as both information resources and sources of support on your journey.

8 <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/>

9 <https://www.equitableeval.org/>

10 <https://www.geofunders.org/>

11 <http://comm.eval.org/nonprofits/home>

12 For additional evidence-based ideas for how to spend wisely on external evaluation, see: The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, April 2014. Benchmarks for Spending on Evaluation. https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Benchmarks%20for%20Spending%20on%20Evaluation_2014.pdf

Resourcing external evaluations: Pros and cons of different models

Budget Model	Pros	Cons
<p>PROGRAM BUDGETS FUND EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS Program staff are responsible for making decisions about E&L investments, with support and guidance from the E&L team as needed (or required) internally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program staff are bought into evaluation partnering decisions as they have primary decision-making authority. • E&L team is able to provide technical assistance and support on purchasing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program staff's desires for evaluation may not fully align with E&L purpose. • Initiating external evaluations may take longer. • External evaluations may be limited to focusing on program-specific work.
<p>INDEPENDENT BUDGET FOR EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS E&L team is responsible for making decisions about E&L investments, with input and guidance from the program staff as needed (or required) internally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E&L team has flexibility and authority to determine priorities for external evaluations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E&L team bears lone accountability for external evaluations; program staff may feel less ownership of evaluations. • Evaluations are less integrated with programs, potentially limiting the ability of E&L teams to partner with program staff on evaluation activities. • Larger E&L team may be required to manage external evaluation and program interface.
<p>HYBRID APPROACH: E&L BUDGET INCLUDES RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL PURPOSES OR CO-INVESTMENT WITH PROGRAMS Programs control their own evaluation budgets but E&L has additional resources for strategy evaluation or other E&L priorities and may co-invest with programs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E&L team has more flexibility and leverage to influence partnering decisions and pursue evaluation goals that span across programs. • Co-investment and collaborative funding can increase program staff support of E&L priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding streams are more complicated to manage. • Adjustments to budget and scope for external evaluation require coordination.

Beyond budgeting, a critical consideration of external evaluation is how to make it useful for your foundation's strategy and practice.

A recent brief highlights several important practices in this regard including:¹³

- Ensuring that program staff understand the types of questions evaluations can answer,
- Knowing how decisions are made and where and when evaluation findings would be meaningful and actionable in that process,
- Aligning evaluation questions with what decision-makers need to know, and
- Facilitating sharing of key takeaways and next steps with colleagues who can use results.

¹³ Stachowiak S, Kalra N, Ammann Howard K. October 2020. Good intentions are not enough: Making evaluations more useful for foundation strategy and practice. FEAN (Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network). <https://fdnweb.org/fean/call-to-action/series/>

Factors contributing to a culture of learning

	Support at executive and program levels	Resources and roles	Infrastructure
High ↑	Leadership and staff model learning behaviors, seeing improvement as essential to their work and the foundation's mission, and thus a key priority for the organization.	Resources are designated for learning activities. Staff roles and responsibilities include capturing, reflecting on, applying, and sharing knowledge.	Programs and organizations have learning activities built in as standard practice, with timelines designed to accommodate them. E&L team partners closely with programs.
Moderate →	Leaders and staff see learning as an aspiration, if not an immediate priority.	Learning is one priority among many competing for resources.	Programs sometimes incorporate learning practices. E&L team is an available resource.
Low ↓	Leadership and staff do not yet prioritize learning.	Budget and staff time are not yet dedicated to learning activities.	Little or no time is allocated for learning activities, which are seen as taking time away from priorities.

Learning culture

Many E&L leaders see learning—the act of reflecting on experience and evidence, then using new understandings to inform strategy or practices—as essential to improving a foundation's effectiveness and reaching its goals. A learning culture also helps to advance equity. But even with good intentions, learning is a practice that can be hard to incorporate into an organization's routines amid competing priorities and urgent deadlines. Cultivating a culture of learning requires organization-wide effort beyond the E&L function. While the E&L

unit can be a champion and resource for this endeavor, understanding how learning is viewed and implemented across the foundation will give you a sense of a critical aspect of support for your role. Multiple factors work together to create a culture of learning. A recent article identifies supportive leaders, a culture of continuous improvements, embedded learning processes, and defined roles and networks as essential elements of organizational learning.¹⁴ By considering how integrated learning is at your foundation along these different parameters, you can identify strengths where E&L can shine and potential



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

What are the gaps, if any, in your understanding of the E&L structure, relationships, and resources?

What are the strengths and opportunities of the existing learning culture at your foundation?

How can the learning culture be a vehicle to advancing equitable mindsets, priorities, and practices at your foundation?

How well and in what ways does your organizational context support your E&L purpose?

opportunities for E&L to encourage more support of learning over time.¹⁵

¹⁴ Chubinski J, Adcock K, Sprigg S. 2019. Challenges and opportunities in philanthropic organizational learning: Reflections from fellow grantmakers. *The Foundation Review*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1454>

¹⁵ For an extensive resource on cultivating a culture of learning, see Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO). May 2019. *Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook*. <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-in-philanthropy-a-guidebook-1265>

Determining priorities in a complex setting

In considering the many stakeholders pulling E&L in different directions, how can you set priorities that meet your purpose and match the capacity of the E&L team?

Social change thought leader Eugene Eric Kim proposes asking four questions to help you act strategically.¹⁶ The numbered action steps shown here are paired with Kim's guiding questions.

¹⁶ Kim EE. Acting Strategically. Faster than 20. <http://fasterthan20.com/framework/acting-strategically/>



Applying this frame to your E&L work can help you conduct a situational assessment and use it to set feasible goals and reasonable next steps. In other words, developing a strategy involves setting priorities and identifying next steps—a process that describes the path you intend to take from your current situation to your goals. Some goals will require developing and implementing

a longer-term strategy before seeing meaningful progress. Others may have more achievable next steps to visible milestones.

Quick wins of this latter type can be helpful in building support of your E&L leadership early in your tenure (see page 16: Identifying Quick Wins and Longer-term Shifts: A Hypothetical Case Example).

The James Irvine Foundation’s Impact Assessment and Learning (IA&L) team went through a priority-setting process in developing their Impact Assessment and Learning Framework. The process they undertook mirrors the action steps for developing a strategy, shown above. The graphic below shows that first, Irvine’s IA&L team analyzed their situation by talking with staff and board members

to gather perspectives about learning and accountability, assessing progress and impact, and applying lessons to strategy decisions. Based on that input, the team then developed a framework detailing how IA&L helps the staff and board advance the foundation’s goals. The framework lays out the IA&L goals, purpose and key principles around the IA&L approach, partnerships

with grantees and others (e.g., on the design and implementation of evaluations), and accountability.

It also outlines an approach to develop IA&L plans for all new initiatives and to infuse equity throughout the work.

HOW THE IRVINE FOUNDATION APPLIED THE STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

1 ANALYZE YOUR SITUATION

2 DETERMINE YOUR GOALS AND PURPOSE

3 DEVELOP A STRATEGY TO MOVE FROM YOUR CURRENT SITUATION TO YOUR GOALS

The James Irvine Foundation...



...gathered perspectives from staff and board

...created a framework outlining goals, purpose and principles

...identified an overall strategy and guidance to operationalize the framework



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: SETTING PRIORITIES

If longer-term priorities are unclear at first, what are your goals as E&L leader over the next few months?

What are your strategies for reaching those goals? What steps do you need to take to begin implementing those strategies?

How and to what extent is equity prioritized?

Who can provide feedback and support on your goals and strategies (and a later revisiting of longer-term priorities)?



IDENTIFYING QUICK WINS AND LONGER-TERM SHIFTS: A HYPOTHETICAL CASE EXAMPLE

Quick wins—or visible achievements in the near term—can be key to demonstrating your capabilities as a new E&L leader. The following hypothetical example illustrates how a new E&L leader might find quick wins while also identifying where a longer-term strategy is needed.

Mayra has extensive experience as an evaluator and independent consultant. She often worked with philanthropic organizations as a consultant but never led an E&L department within a foundation until now. She started a new role as the E&L lead at a foundation about five weeks ago. For the last five years, the E&L department has focused primarily on quantitative metrics to contribute to the board's dashboard needs. Currently, E&L is evolving to incorporate evaluation approaches that are more equitable and community-driven.

Mayra started to build initial relationships with her coworkers through informal interviews with program officers, learning about the purpose of E&L within the foundation and gauging how much

support the E&L department has across different departments. Through the interviews, she sought to learn more about the organizational culture at her foundation, the interests of leadership, and the E&L needs of different departments. She found that the majority of program officers were interested in centering community more in program strategy decisions and evaluation work.

Based on insights she gained from her informal interviews, Mayra decided to conduct a survey that would highlight the data needs across different departments. **She felt that a survey would be quick to implement, deepen her understanding of how E&L could best support the foundation, and demonstrate her attention to colleagues' needs.** On the survey, she included questions about the extent to which the metrics that are currently collected by E&L effectively inform strategy decisions with the community in mind. Most program officers across the foundation shared that they were pleasantly surprised to have those questions in the E&L survey.

Mayra analyzed the survey data and found that the majority of program departments wanted to center community more in strategy development and evaluation efforts, but they were often unsure about how to do so. When Mayra shared the findings with other leaders at the foundation, they were impressed and congratulated her on lifting up these insights so early in her role. She also shared the survey results with other staff to build common understanding.

A week later at a leadership meeting, she learned that the board would likely not react favorably to the proposed shifts that the findings suggested. **Mayra realized that helping the board understand the value of centering community in strategy and evaluation efforts could be a longer-term shift that she could focus on with them.** She decided to continue to meet the board's needs for standardized measures while working with program staff to incorporate community-centered methods that would help show the value of this approach down the road.



THE FIRST 100 DAYS: GETTING A HANDLE ON YOUR E&L POSITION

As an E&L leader new to your position, you have stepped into a role that demands navigating numerous complexities.

To become responsive and influential in your role, you will need to understand your purpose as well as the context and dynamics of your organization.

This tool provides concrete steps to grow your understanding. Because the needs of the job shift as foundation priorities, procedures, and personnel change over time, the questions in the box to the right will be useful to revisit throughout your tenure.

Where do I start?

1 REVIEW QUESTIONS

Read through the questions on the following page.

- Which do you feel comfortable answering now?
- Which do you need to gather more information on?
- Write down any additional questions that come up for you.

2 IDENTIFY AND INTERVIEW

Identify several colleagues and other stakeholders who could help shed light on these questions.

- What perspectives would contribute to an overall sense of the organization's E&L needs and opportunities, for example among the executive team, board members, and program staff? Whose voices are not usually heard, particularly when examining equity-related issues?
- Schedule informal interviews with the people on your list, preparing questions appropriate for each person's standpoint. (If interviews are not feasible, consider working your questions into casual conversation when opportunities arise.)

3 ANALYZE INFORMATION

After your interviews, revisit the questions on the next page and consider how your understanding has grown or shifted.

- How does your information-gathering guide your near-term and longer-term plans as an E&L leader?
- Who might you share your assessment and recommendations with?
- What questions remain?

4 CONTINUE PROCESS

Establish an ongoing practice of occasional meetings with a variety of colleagues with the express purpose of building trusting thought-partner relationships. Identify and include among these colleagues E&L leaders at peer organizations to gather insights from how their experiences mirror or differ from yours.



TOOL

Assessing the situation

The visual below highlights how you can work to understand the context and dynamics of your organization.



- Who are your allies or partners outside of your foundation (i.e., E&L leaders at other foundations, consultants, and other professionals)?

Available resources

- How and to what extent is that purpose aligned with equitable principles?
- What resources do you have, including dollars, staffing, technology infrastructure, and other elements that enable your operations?

PURPOSE

Department purpose

- What is the purpose of E&L within your foundation?
- How and to what extent is that purpose aligned with equitable principles?

Evaluation users and uses

- Who are the primary users of E&L efforts in your foundation?
- What are their evaluation and learning needs?
- What is E&L's role in supporting grantees, external stakeholders, and community?

Questions for New E&L Leaders

Understanding the E&L role

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

History of E&L

- How has E&L's presence and role within the foundation evolved over time?
- To what extent is your new leadership part of a shift in the foundation's approach to E&L or equity?

Relationships

- What has been the historical relationship between the E&L staff at your foundation and program staff? Executive staff? Board? Community?
- At what types of meetings is E&L routinely represented?

Allies and partners

- Who are your E&L allies at your foundation (i.e., program, executive, communications staff who can help advance E&L's mission)?



TOOL

Individual purpose and views

- What is your purpose as a leader of these efforts? What is your role in driving or supporting the foundation's strategy and efforts to advance equity?
- What world views and experiences do you bring to this position? Who and what have been your key influences?

VALUES AND CULTURE

Values

- How do the foundation's values relate to the E&L approach? To a learning culture?
- How do the foundation's values align with equity efforts?
- How, if at all, has the E&L function embedded equity throughout its work?
- In addition to explicitly identified values, are there organizational values that are unnamed?

Culture

- How would you characterize the foundation's culture around learning in general?

- Are there ways in which existing norms (e.g., white dominant norms) might pose challenges or opportunities in advancing cultural shifts?

Considering strategy and opportunities

PRIORITY SETTING

Priorities

- What are the E&L priorities of those you report to?
- How can these inform feasible goals and next steps for the near term?

Quick wins

- In looking at the E&L department's strategy and activities, what is the low-hanging fruit?
- Where might you start (or go next) to embed E&L in foundation processes or build more support for it?

Aspirations

- Are you forming additional ideas about shaping the E&L function?

In what ways can you establish credibility and earn support to grow your future influence?

CULTIVATING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Internal Support

- How can you strengthen your relationship and alignment with the person you report to?
- What additional support does your E&L department need in order to advance its goals?

External Support

- How can you expand your peer network and access to knowledge outside the organization?

Learning culture

- What are the strengths and opportunities of the existing learning culture at your foundation?
- What can you do as an E&L leader to cultivate a learning culture?
- What opportunities do you see for E&L to support the foundation's racial equity efforts?



Relevance and Effectiveness in a Dynamic Context

SECTION TWO

THE DANCE OF E&L LEADERSHIP

As a more seasoned E&L leader—just past or long past the first 100 days on the job—you have gained appreciation of the complexities of E&L.

Any way you slice it, E&L leaders are navigating competing interests. Trustees may have a strong interest in impact while program staff place central importance on learning. The time may be right for a proactive focus on equity, yet your team is stretched to capacity. You must constantly call upon your technical skills and interpersonal skills, your thorough abilities and your flexibility. Indeed, although the specific demands on the E&L unit change over time, the complexity of those demands continues.

This section of the guide is designed to help leaders understand the dynamics of maintaining relevance and effectiveness in their positions over time. It describes common, and not necessarily resolvable, tensions frequently encountered in these roles; shares strategies for integrating evaluation and learning

into a foundation's work and cultivating a learning culture; and touches upon how changing expectations of philanthropy are also influencing evaluation and learning.

“So many hands touch every decision. How [E&L staff] navigate people dynamics and the system to move things forward is really complex.”

IRVINE FOUNDATION
STAFF MEMBER

TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER

pg 22
Managing polarities

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Integrating E&L into
a foundation's work

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Cultivating a
learning culture

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E&L's role as
philanthropy
evolves

Managing polarities

By coming to see the tensions inherent in the E&L position not as conflicts to resolve, but as **enduring polarities that benefit** from thoughtful management, the E&L function can better maintain flexibility while charting a course guided by its central purpose.¹⁷

As an E&L leader, your ability to influence the conditions around you is limited. Managing polarities is a dance of sorts, responding to many forces that push and pull, and recognizing that there's much that you don't control. Anticipating when and how much to step forward or back with the right foot or left is a skill that is both critical and difficult, and one to hone over time. In addition, tensions sometimes signal misalignments, for example between the E&L team's capacity and what they are being asked to accomplish. If you feel that a polarity is challenging to manage, it may mean you need to ask for more clarity or direction.

The following pages explore common tensions, or polarities to manage, that come into play with evaluation and learning. They include breadth vs. depth,

accountability vs. learning, neutral evaluator vs. strategy influencer, and internal vs. external focus.

Anticipating when and how much to step forward or back when it comes to managing different tensions that come into play around evaluation and learning is a skill that is both critical and difficult, and one to hone over time.

¹⁷ L. December 2018. Navigating complexity: Managing polarities. Leading the Way blog. Harvard Business Publishing. [harvardbusiness.org/navigating-complexity-managing-polarities](https://hbr.org/navigating-complexity-managing-polarities)

The following examples of polarities provide windows into how specific foundations have sought to manage them:

BREADTH VS. DEPTH

E&L teams usually face far more requests and opportunities than their capacity and resources allow. They constantly must decide how broadly to stretch themselves while recognizing the time it takes to do the work well.

Management strategy: Maximize usefulness within capacity limits

Consider with the E&L team if time spent on an activity is best meeting your needs and the needs of those with whom you engage. Could an adjusted process or flexible approach lead to a better balance? What scope of work can you accomplish well?

At the Kresge Foundation, for example:

“We don’t evaluate everything. We focus our third-party evaluation resources on new bodies of work, work that is at the edges of our strategies, multi-site/year initiatives, and communities of practice. We don’t evaluate every grant or every initiative.”

At the Irvine Foundation, for example:

“We struggled at first to figure out how to attend [program-level] team meetings and add value and have it be a good use of limited time. I didn’t want to sit in meetings and not feel useful for them or for me, but I needed to build trust. Once we were able to build the [E&L] team more, we were able to each be assigned to different teams... And there’s not a one-size-fits-all model. We needed some connection to the [program] team, but each team is different in how [E&L] shows up. We can be really intentional and have a connection but need to be agile in how that connection happens.”

ACCOUNTABILITY VS. LEARNING

Trustees are often concerned with seeing the impact of grantmaking, while staff and grantees see value in learning and applying lessons. E&L teams must balance these different needs.

Management strategy: Understand that evaluation must speak to multiple audiences

E&L leaders must balance their focus on accountability versus learning. While in some cases those two interests can work in synergy, in other cases there can be tensions between them.

An Irvine Foundation staff member speaks to the reality of managing but not resolving this polarity:

“We have that connection between the learning that teams are doing to maximize their effectiveness and the dynamic of having to report back to our board. There is an ongoing tension between the different audiences. As with many foundations, there’s emphasis on what we need to put in our board report. How do we make sure the evaluations collect that? There’s always this dance that results because we want to say that the learning is really for staff and grantees, but in practice that is challenging to lean into as much as we want. It’s navigating the murky waters of how we make sure evaluation meets the needs of different audiences.”

Grounded in the principles of Equitable Evaluation, a Kauffman Foundation staff member emphasizes evaluation as a powerful tool in advancing equity by sharing and building upon collective learning.¹⁸ A historical quote from Ewing Marion Kauffman himself illustrates the founder’s view that impact and learning do go hand in hand: “See to it that you evaluate all your programs with a good analysis as to how well they’ve succeeded. Be very frank about those that didn’t succeed, be willing to tell other foundations about the failures that you’ve had because they can learn from that. Be also willing to tell them of the successes that you’ve had because they can duplicate them.”

¹⁸ Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>



NEUTRAL EVALUATOR VS. STRATEGY & EQUITY INFLUENCER

A clear influence (and, in some cases, purpose) of evaluation is to draw from evidence to inform strategic shifts. Yet, if the E&L team is tasked with assessing the success of a strategy, having a stake in that strategy is a potential source of bias and may limit others' engagement with findings.

Management strategy: Influence strategy with equity considerations

E&L teams can bring value to strategy development by providing thought partnership on equity while still limiting actual or perceived conflicts of interest.

The Kauffman E&L team circumvents this tension by positioning themselves as thought partners rather than strategy decision makers:

"Our work is grounded in the principles of Equitable Evaluation. And so, while we do

not believe that it is our role to make decisions about our strategies, we see it as our responsibility to bring an equity lens to the work.¹⁹ We consider ourselves instrumental thought partners who are able to ask provocative questions, contextualize the work within historical and structural inequities, and situate our learning so that it is done in partnership with the communities we serve."

The Kresge Foundation's E&L team, rather than being a neutral evaluator, takes a clear position that learning and unlearning is required for advancing equity:

"[The E&L team] has a real commitment to learning and unlearning... consistent with our equity value as an organization. Part of the way that manifests is in our commitment to bringing principles of the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ to the whole of our practice. Fundamentally, we are asking, 'Who is this for? Who is evaluation and learning serving? Who is left out? How do we promote shared ownership?' There's both a forward [motion] as well as a slowing down to the present tense so that we can unsettle and see what we might need to shift."²⁰

"Our E&L department is very involved at the front end of developing strategies and even at the front end of developing initiatives."

KRESGE FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

¹⁹ Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>

²⁰ Ibid



INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL USERS

Many foundations see the staff and CEO as the primary users of their evaluation findings, much less frequently sharing them publicly, with other foundations, or even with grantees.²¹ Yet a rising focus on equity may be shifting interest towards engaging grantees in co-learning with the foundation and increasing transparency of findings.

Management strategy: Increase support for engaging external users in E&L by phasing in new practices that carry both internal and external benefits

As focus increases on external users of evaluation and learning, the E&L team can work with program staff to test new practices and build a case for the value of engaging external users.

At the Irvine Foundation, which engages grantees in strategy development and evaluation, a leader says that gradually expanding broad ownership of these practices among foundation staff helps to normalize it: “We include grantees in different aspects of the evaluation to ensure that the evaluation is useful to them as well as us. We share what we are learning with grantees and others as we go. Start

with a team or program area that is most ready to lean into this effort and then have program staff—not just E&L staff—highlight for others the process and benefits.”

The Kauffman Foundation has increased its focus on external users in recent years. Similar to the Irvine Foundation, a Kauffman staff member advises thoughtfully developing capacity to work with external users over time:

“Since we are learners and practitioners of Equitable Evaluation, we do our best to orient our work toward participant ownership.²² We engage grantee and community partners in learning by, for example, hosting meaning-making sessions, ensuring feedback loops so that participants are also beneficiaries of our shared learning, and supporting grantee capacity building related to strategic learning and impact measurement. To pursue deep engagement with grantees, start small and pilot so that you can build authentic relationships, improve as you go, and avoid overwhelming your capacity. In addition, continue to provide visibility internally to ensure you have the support you need to drive E&L goals.”

At the Kresge Foundation, one rationale for focusing on grantees as key external users of E&L is that the learning engagements can generate visible achievements:

“We include grantee voice at almost every phase of developing and evaluating initiatives, using developmental evaluation approaches to really center grantee learning and grantee/funder co-learning. Sometimes early wins come through grantee work instead of internal work.”



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: MANAGING POLARITIES

What tensions or challenges are present in your work?

What supports and strategies could help you manage these tensions as polarities to balance rather than resolve?

²¹ Center for Evaluation Innovation. January 2020. Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices 2020. https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/cei_benchmarking2020/
²² Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>



EVALUATION AND LEARNING SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Leading an evaluation and learning function requires a wide range of skills—technical expertise, yes, but also less tangible abilities. Indeed, the expectations of evaluators and the skills they bring to the work have grown over time.²³

The following are some of the many skills and characteristics that E&L leaders find necessary in their multifaceted roles of guiding useful and rigorous evaluation, facilitating learning, building relationships, and navigating organizational culture and bureaucracy. This starting list can help you identify skills to strengthen in yourself and on your team, and to inform hiring opportunities to create an effective complement of colleagues or find third party collaborators who bring more skills to bear.

Research skills in applied social science	Articulation of theories of change (linear or inferential thinking)	Organizational development	Change management	Learning facilitation
Compelling verbal and written communication skills for a non-technical audience	Lateral or systems thinking	Nimbleness and adaptability	High emotional intelligence	Coaching and training skills
	Strategic planning and strategy development	Patience and persistence	Ability to navigate personalities and relationships	Understanding of grantmaking and philanthropy as a field
		Comfort with tensions that can't be resolved	Willingness to self-reflect on equity	Openness to different ways of knowing and being

²³ Coffman J. April 2016. Oh for the Love of Sticky Notes! The Changing Role of Evaluators Who Work with Foundations. Center for Evaluation Innovation. <https://medium.com/@jcoffman/oh-for-the-love-of-sticky-notes-the-changing-role-of-evaluators-who-work-with-foundations-66ec1ffed2e4>

GROWING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND INFLUENCE OF E&L

Having acquired experience as an E&L leader, you have developed and refined your ideas of what more effective evaluation and foundation-wide learning might look like.

How can you get there?

Overall, E&L has more opportunity to inform and improve the foundation's efforts if it is **integrated** into the day-to-day work across the organization, and if the organization has a **strong learning culture**. While such conditions are only created as a result of many different actors, there are chances for you to encourage practices that integrate E&L more fully and to make incremental shifts in the learning environment.

In addition, beyond the foundation's walls, E&L has the potential to contribute to the fields of evaluation and philanthropy. **Sharing knowledge**—such as actionable evaluation findings, learning strategies, or approaches to centering community—with peer organizations, increases the influence of your foundation and helps to advance philanthropic, E&L, and equity practices broadly.^{24, 25} Such efforts to contribute to the broader field take time and resources; pursuing those efforts may require making a strong case to the executive team about why knowledge sharing deserves to be a funded priority.

Beyond the foundation's walls, E&L has the potential to contribute to the fields of evaluation and philanthropy. By sharing knowledge, leaders can help advance philanthropic and evaluation and learning practices broadly.

24 Camarena J, Halverstadt A, eds. October 2020. Knowledge sharing is a mission imperative: Why we cannot afford to keep evaluation findings to ourselves and how we can do better. FEAN (Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network). <https://fdnweb.org/fean/call-to-action/knowledge-sharing/>

25 Engage R+D, Equal Measure. June 2021. How funders seek and use knowledge to influence philanthropic practice. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. <https://hewlett.org/soaring-interest-in-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-how-funders-seek-and-use-knowledge/>

Integrating E&L into a foundation's work

Across foundations, we found that embedding E&L throughout foundation practices—making evaluation and learning integrated parts of day-to-day work for all staff—can stabilize the role of E&L over time.

Several structural factors commonly support integration of E&L into a foundation's other work. Aspects of formal structure (e.g., chain of command, budget authority, staffing) and informal structure (e.g., relationships and influence of the E&L team) affect the influence and integration of E&L.

Although some of the factors may feel static and difficult to change, the following table identifies potential opportunities to strengthen key relationships and make a compelling case for embedding E&L practices over the longer term.



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: FACILITATORS OF E&L

What aspects of the foundation's leadership, culture, structure, or dynamics facilitate your ability to accomplish your goals as an E&L leader?

How can you begin to strengthen connections and relationships that are critical for E&L effectiveness?

Influencing the Factors Supporting E&L's Integration Into a Foundation's Other Work

Factor	Description	Opportunities for Influence
INTERFACE WITH EXECUTIVE TEAM	The E&L lead's interface with executive management is critical to the position's success. Because supportive decision makers are key to promoting the E&L mission, executives must see E&L as essential to effectiveness and impact. ²⁶ In practical terms, executives can support E&L by providing formal structure and resources, understanding the challenges of the function, and defusing tensions between accountability and learning roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for chances to demonstrate the value of E&L, including through quick wins (described on page 16). You may also choose to highlight how program-level evaluation has improved grantee interface and program impact. Present new ideas by showing how they would meet foundation-wide goals and priorities. • Cultivate E&L champions among individuals at the executive level who have shown interest in what E&L can provide. Ask for their support of feasible next steps to improve your interface with the executive team, such as having a seat at key meetings.
HOW E&L IS POSITIONED RELATIVE TO OTHER WORK	E&L functions are most widely embraced in a collaborative, rather than oversight , role with other foundation functions. Program staff see evaluation as more useful when positioned to support a strategy, not as an arbiter of a strategy's value or a judge of a body of work. In addition, E&L departments may be most effective if viewed as a resource for a foundation's broad efforts to build a learning culture, rather than having sole responsibility for developing the learning culture. ²⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify the purpose and role of the E&L function by grounding the work in a central set of values that includes collaboration. Model collaborative behaviors and reflective learning by, for example, inviting program input on learning goals and sharing what the E&L team has learned about its own practices. • Encourage program teams' use of E&L practices and tools that enable them to answer questions of interest to them and reap benefits of their own E&L efforts, establishing a sense of value and ownership.
EVALUATION BUDGETING	Our research suggests that E&L teams are most effective when given their own budgets for sharing knowledge with the field, co-investment in evaluations, or research to benefit the whole organization. Having some budget authority helps E&L teams build influence with staff and shape evaluation approaches. However, giving program staff ultimate responsibility for evaluation purchasing decisions can support productive relationships between E&L and program teams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch for opportunities to float ideas with executive staff about evaluation and learning opportunities that would not live at the program level. Foundation-wide inquiry, learning, or externally-focused knowledge sharing may serve a different, compelling purpose and would make sense to fund through an independent E&L budget. • Proactively nurture good working relationships with program staff, including helping to think about E&L during their budget planning. Program directors and officers often find it difficult to forecast how much funding E&L work will require and may genuinely appreciate your partnership in thinking about how much to budget and what to prioritize.

26 Lopez A. October 2019. How Leaders Affect Evaluation Capacity Building in Foundations. Center for Evaluation Innovation. <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/insight/how-leaders-affect-evaluation-capacity-building-in-foundations/>

27 For further guidance, see Coffman J, Beer T. 2016. How Do You Measure Up? Finding Fit Between Foundations and Their Evaluation Functions, The Foundation Review, 8(4) Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1325>

Cultivating a learning culture

In their guide, **Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization**, Hallie Preskill and Katelyn Mack note a common disconnect between evaluation and decision making.²⁸

This disconnect, sometimes characterized by lack of alignment between more piecemeal evaluation efforts and an organization's more systemic information needs, too often prevents organizations from maximizing learning. For your foundation to fully reap the benefits of evaluations, they must be designed to inform broader learning and decisions and the organization's structure and culture must be receptive to hearing and applying lessons. Indeed, many grantmakers see room for improvement in how their organizational culture supports learning, according to a 2017 study.²⁹ Developing a learning organization, though, does not fall solely under the responsibility of an E&L function, but requires buy-

in and intentional engagement across the foundation. As one leader at the Kauffman Foundation described it, "[In terms of building a] culture of learning, each of us are architects of it, and it's [each of] our responsibilities... It's a danger if an organization wanted to locate the responsibility for learning just within the evaluation team, or just within any team. Then you're at risk of team members abdicating their responsibility around learning."

Foundations, following a broader societal shift, are also paying increasing attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within their walls as well as their influence on DEI through grantmaking. Like learning, equity work demands an integrated,

foundation-wide effort, and both learning and unlearning are essential to the process. As an E&L leader, taking action on building a learning culture and promoting equity entail a balance between advancing ideas and encouraging broad ownership beyond the E&L team. In some cases, however, you may be working to advance equity in a foundation that does not see equity as an organizational priority. This section highlights opportunities you have to promote foundation-wide learning and equity work.

²⁸ Preskill H, Mack K. August 2013. Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization. FSG. <https://www.fsg.org/publications/building-strategic-learning-and-evaluation-system-your-organization>

²⁹ Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. 2017. Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter? A National Study of Philanthropic Practice. http://jfn.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Is-Grantmaking-Getting-Smarter_-2017-2.pdf

To integrate learning—and ownership of learning—across the organization:

Cultivate E&L allies. Make it easy for foundation staff to be a strong ally of E&L (See page 33: What Does it Take To Be an E&L Ally?) by providing timely reminders of what that takes—from including E&L in budgets to scheduling reflection and learning sessions to applying key lessons. Make specific asks of staff with the potential to be stronger allies to bring their attention to the idea. Their endorsements can help E&L skeptics to reconsider.

Encourage broad ownership. Even when the E&L team is involved, ask program staff or other colleagues to present lessons learned or facilitate learning sessions to discuss experiences, evaluation findings, and implications for the foundation and its partners. Be inclusive in describing the learning community at the foundation and

those leading and participating in learning efforts.

Reward reflection. Actively recognize teams and staff who carve out space for thinking outside of the bounds of a particular project or agenda, connecting dots across projects or programs, and considering longer term ideas and aspirations. If opportunities for such reflection are scarce, deliberately build them into staff retreats and/or on a smaller scale designate meeting time for big picture reflection.

Share actionable lessons. Keep staff at the foundation broadly informed of lessons and efforts that are targeted for their use by sharing findings from E&L efforts and how specifically they can inform practices.

“[The E&L team] has a real commitment to learning and unlearning... consistent with our equity value as an organization. Part of the way that manifests is in our commitment to bringing principles of the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ to the whole of our practice.³⁰ Fundamentally, we are asking, ‘Who is this for? Who is evaluation and learning serving? Who is left out?’”

KRESGE FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

³⁰ Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>



LEARNING AND EQUITY FOCUS

In the Equitable Evaluation Framework™, Jara Dean-Coffey advances three principles to orient foundations' evaluations to be about and for equity.³¹ Namely:

- Evaluation work is in service of and contributes to equity. Production, consumption, and management of evaluation and evaluative work should hold at its core a responsibility to advance progress towards equity.
- Evaluative work should be designed and implemented in a way that is commensurate with the values underlying equity work. It should be multi-culturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership.
- Evaluative work can and should answer critical questions about the effect of a strategy on different populations and on the underlying systemic drivers of inequity, and the ways in which history and cultural context are tangled up in the structural conditions and the change initiative itself.

SNAPSHOTS FROM THREE FOUNDATIONS

Five years ago at the **James Irvine** Foundation, evaluation and learning were highly valued but tended to be less intentional and integrated. The Impact Assessment and Learning department was formed to help embed E&L within different aspects of the work and inform strategy and grantmaking. Now, Irvine is grappling with what it means to address racial equity more explicitly as an organization. Examining its evaluation and learning approach and practices is a critical part of that effort.

The **Kresge** Foundation is working on shaping an organization that is centered

on learning and acknowledging different ways of knowing and being in the world. This requires unlearning Western ways of being as the only ways of moving the work. Much of the work to address this issue happens internally with staff and partners.

The **Kauffman** Foundation is elevating its commitment to racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. The E&L team has committed to be learners and practitioners of Equitable Evaluation, which challenges them to think, do, and engage differently.³² This includes attending to power dynamics and eliminating practices that perpetuate harm.



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: EQUITY IN EVALUATION

Who is defining what success looks like for the program or strategy? What opportunities can grantees or community members have to define positive impact from their perspectives?

What does evaluation need in terms of budget and timeframe to build trust and work alongside community throughout the evaluation process?

How can evaluation questions and findings be useful to the communities where the foundation hopes to make a difference?

How can evaluation explore and account for contextual and systemic drivers of inequity in communities implementing a funded strategy?

³¹ Dean-Coffey J. 2017. Equitable Evaluation Framework™. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative*. <https://www.equitableval.org/framework>

³² Ibid



WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE AN E&L ALLY?

Evaluation and learning (E&L) have enormous potential to help grantmakers understand community and grantee needs, improve effectiveness, and guide strategy.

An E&L unit at a foundation can facilitate the implementation of evaluation and learning in the organization's routine work, but making E&L practices happen regularly and meaningfully also requires commitment and action from staff

outside of the E&L team. To gain the benefits of E&L, foundation staff must take active roles—like those below—in embracing inquiry, reflection, and evidence-based change.



To promote learning and equity hand in hand:

Keep in mind that many of the following endeavors are not quick items to check off. They are very substantial undertakings that could take years to unpack and develop in foundations but are meant as meaningful ideas for engaging in learning and equity work.

Invite curiosity. Use emergent learning approaches to ask thoughtful questions of your colleagues. Disaggregate evaluation data by race/ethnicity (or other identities) to help others see inequity.

Partner with equity champions. Find colleagues at your foundation who are also working to promote equity and collaborate to tangibly demonstrate to the organization the value of advancing equity through their work and E&L efforts.

Listen to those you seek to serve. Hold listening sessions in partner communities. Approach more of your internal practices as opportunities for partnership and alignment with the community, such as application review or co-learning sessions. Use the external context, where calls for systemic changes are a strong theme, as a source of positive pressure on your organization.

Address equity in every evaluation. Engage the E&L team in the ongoing learning, unlearning, and work required

to equitably gather and analyze data (See Deeper Dive on page 35: E&L's Integral Role in Equity Efforts), for example through application of the Equitable Evaluation Framework™.³³ Evaluations, by including examination of systemic drivers of inequity, can actively advance equity work.³⁴

Make sure equity is core to the learning work across the foundation. Among other guidance provided by the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations' Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook, provide the time and resources needed to learn with equity at the center of the process and explicitly discuss the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ with foundation staff.³⁵

Lift the importance of values and lived experience in hiring and career support. Attend to DEI in hiring E&L staff and in contracting with third parties. Support equity, inclusivity, and evaluators of color throughout the career life cycle.³⁶

Build trust. Work to develop trusting, collegial relationships across the foundation that honor common values, demonstrate understanding, and invite open sharing of ideas. Establishing a solid basis of trust is an essential precursor to constructively confronting bias and grappling with uncomfortable learning and unlearning.



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: PROMOTING LEARNING AND EQUITY

What are your opportunities to develop stronger E&L allies at your organization who can champion learning among staff and support a learning-conducive infrastructure?

How ready is your E&L team to address equity (See Deeper Dive on page 35: E&L's Integral Role in Equity Efforts)? What more can you do to build readiness within your team and across the foundation?

How can you collaborate with E&L allies to embed equity into foundation processes?

33 Equitable Evaluation Initiative, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. 2021. Shifting the evaluation paradigm: The Equitable Evaluation Framework (EEF)™. <https://www.equitableeval.org/blog-main/shifting-the-evaluation-paradigm-the-equitable-evaluation-framework-eef>

34 Stachowiak S, Kalra N, Ammann Howard K. October 2020. Good intentions are not enough: Making evaluations more useful for foundation strategy and practice. FEAN (Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network). <https://fdnweb.org/fean/call-to-action/series/>

35 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. May 2019. Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook. <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-in-philanthropy-a-guidebook-126>

36 Engage R+D. 2020. "Listening for change: Evaluators of color speak out about experiences with foundations and evaluation firms." The James Irvine Foundation. <https://www.irvine.org/insights/why-is-evaluation-so-white-perspectives-from-evaluators-of-color/>



E&L'S INTEGRAL ROLE IN EQUITY EFFORTS

Across philanthropy, foundations are at different stages of their equity work, from more nascent to more advanced.

Evaluation and learning teams also vary in how they support organization-wide equity efforts, with team interests, capacities, and composition presenting different opportunities to contribute. With appropriate resources and support, E&L teams are an asset to a foundation's often challenging work of equity-related reflection and growth. The learning and unlearning that is part of equity work across the organization relies on the learning skills and culture that E&L supports and on awareness of norms ingrained in this white dominated field.

Within the E&L function as well, intentionality with regard to equity is integral to gathering and analyzing data from communities of color.³⁷ A Kresge Foundation staff member explained that part of the E&L job is being thoughtful

37 Monitor Institute. 2017. Reimagining Measurement: A Better Future for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning. Monitor Institute by Deloitte. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/monitor-institute/articles/re-imagining-measurement-strategic-learning-toolkit.html>

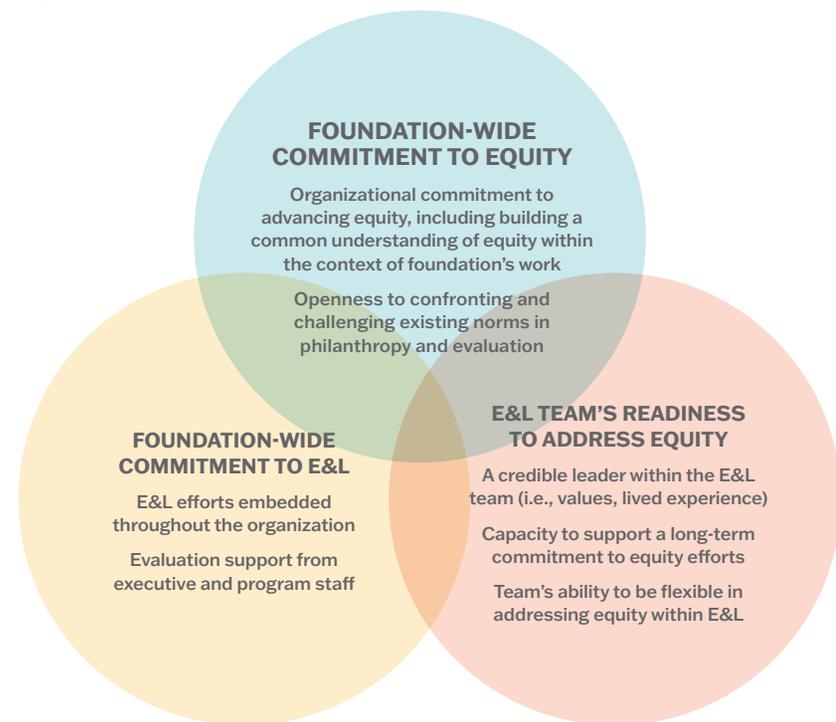
about what information you most need, appropriate strategies for gathering that information, and what kind of disaggregating you need to do to avoid hurting communities of color. It's a matter, she said, of "making sure we

Factors influencing E&L's ability to support foundation-wide equity work

There are three factors that can influence an E&L department's ability to support foundation-wide equity efforts:

- 1) a **foundation-wide commitment to equity;**
- 2) a **foundation-wide commitment to E&L;**
- and
- 3) an **E&L team's readiness to address equity.**

are not inadvertently doing harm by not asking the right questions. This requires building trusting relationships with colleagues and pushing them to confront their own biases."



E&L's role as philanthropy evolves

Your role as an E&L leader is influenced by how your foundation positions itself in relation to grantees and the communities they serve.

Your foundation's role, in turn, is influenced by social, political, and economic pressures and expectations placed on philanthropy. Considering the presence of those larger forces and how they are shifting over time will keep your eyes open to how you as an E&L leader can respond to, align with, and anticipate philanthropy's evolving responsibilities.

With more attention to income inequality, wealth, and power dynamics in recent years, philanthropy has faced increased public scrutiny. Indeed, as the authors of the paper *Social Compact in a Changing World* argue, not only must funders contend with the “paradox... that many foundations work to combat financial inequality or its results, while philanthropy itself is a product of that

inequality,” but their credibility in terms of truly understanding communities is coming under question.³⁸ This context of rising demand for community-centered and community-led strategies and learning is pressing philanthropy to become more accountable to grantees and communities, and not view accountability as only the other way around. However, foundations can be hampered by strategy, grantmaking, and evaluation structures and processes that undermine accountability to grantees and communities.³⁹ As you can see, such a shift has strong implications for E&L. How specifically could E&L support a foundation's shift toward greater accountability to communities and to equity goals?⁴⁰

“We believe that returning learning to the communities we seek to serve is part of the responsibility that we have.”

KRESGE FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER

38 Berman MA, Karibi-Whyte R, Tarasov O. September 2019. “Social compact in a changing world: How philanthropies are grappling with growing scrutiny and critique.” Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. <https://www.rockpa.org/project/social-compact-in-a-changing-world/>

39 Beer, T., Patrizi, P., & Coffman, J. (2021). Holding Foundations Accountable for Equity Commitments. *The Foundation Review*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1565>

40 See also Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. June 2015. Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers. <https://www.geofunders.org/resources/learning-together-actionable-approaches-for-grantmakers-682>

The following six action steps for E&L leaders suggest ways the function can help to support this shift.

- Develop information-gathering activities to learn about community needs, what's working, and what's not working.
- Design evaluations to address questions of value to communities. Involve community leaders in developing questions of interest.
- Share findings back with participants. Share findings about the foundation's accountability (not grantee accountability) publicly, vetting any mentions of grantees or community stakeholders prior to release.
- Hold sensemaking sessions with grantees and community members to discuss results.
- Acknowledge power dynamics in interactions with community members. Articulate community influence in strategies and decisions to demonstrate listening and community commitment.
- Consider how extensively to center communities in E&L (See Deeper Dive on page 38: An Alternative Model: Trust-Based Philanthropy).

“How do we ensure that the Foundation’s strategic learning questions are guided by community voice and experience? Aligned with that [question] is doing a better job of working with communities to make sense of the results and sharing our learnings to help strengthen the work of others.”

KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION STAFF MEMBER



QUESTIONS FOR YOU: AN EVOLVING ROLE

How is your foundation grappling with a shifting social context? What implications does this have for your E&L role?

What opportunities do you have to encourage more communication with and accountability to communities?

How are you building relationships with community?



AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL: TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY

This guide includes a range of orientations to evaluation and learning—from assessing investment impacts to informing strategic adaptation to cultivating equity- and learning-focused cultures.

We believe these approaches resonate broadly in philanthropy. At the same time, we are seeing signs of new approaches to evaluation and learning emerging among foundations that have adopted trust-based principles to guide their work.⁴¹ This emerging model offers one path to responding to a call for greater involvement by grantees and communities in grantmaking decisions.

“We see ourselves as partners with the community and want to share what’s making a difference—what’s working and what’s not working—and to provide information to help people make decisions.”

HEADWATERS FOUNDATION CEO BRENDA SOLORZANO

⁴¹ Trust-Based Philanthropy: An Overview. Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>

Below are brief profiles of two such foundations and how they use evaluation and learning to assess their own role in supporting community-led efforts and (particularly in the case of Headwaters) to inform community-based knowledge needs.

The Headwaters Foundation

The Headwaters Foundation—a health conversion foundation serving Western Montana—was an early adopter of trust-based philanthropy, joining The Whitman Institute and the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation in 2018 to collaboratively encourage trust-based funding. Headwaters embraces the idea that its resources belong to the community to support community-driven change. In practice, Headwaters builds trust by centering community voices in the foundation’s work, for example as the basis for the foundation’s theory of change. Further, by making multi-year, unrestricted funding commitments, Headwaters demonstrates trust in community organizations to lead work toward community-defined success.

The Headwaters approach flips some traditional notions of evaluation and learning. In multiple ways, the foundation strives to ensure that evaluation prioritizes grantee interests and promotes mutual learning by grantee and funder. Evaluation and learning at Headwaters focus on helping the

community understand what is and isn’t working in community change efforts and on how the funder can improve as a partner.⁴² In addition, foundation staff take on much of the work of data collection and reporting to enable grantees to attend to mission-related work rather than grant requirements.

The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation

The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation (RSCF) is a private foundation that aims to help create and sustain a vibrant and equitable New York City through leadership development and support. RSCF sees its role as being a collaborative partner of grantees who themselves know the best use of funds and what success looks like in the community. Like the Headwaters Foundation, RSCF aims to give community leaders agency and resources to build the future they envision, typically providing multi-year general operating grants.

Evaluation and learning at RSCF fits with its trust-based philosophy. By focusing on accountability—of the foundation,

not of grantees—the funder seeks to demonstrate its commitment to community partnership. To assess its own impact, RSCF conducts structured check-in conversations with grantees in lieu of formal reporting and surveys a representative sample of grantees on the impact of the funding and the effectiveness of RSCF support beyond check-writing. Foundation staff reflect on aggregate findings to examine their performance on different components of their logic model and how they could improve their practices going forward.

“RSCF thinks grantees are best equipped to make decisions, not just about how to use the money, but also to assess their own work.”

ROBERT STERLING CLARK FOUNDATION
PRESIDENT AND CEO, PHILIP LI

⁴² Cook J., Luminet, A, Castrique-Meier, L., Ridgway, A. Big Sky Thinking: A Look at How the Headwaters Foundation Centered Trust in Their Evaluation and Learning Practices. <https://www.fsg.org/blog/big-sky-thinking-headwaters-foundation-centered-trust-evaluation-learning>



TOOL

RELEVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS IN A DYNAMIC CONTEXT

Managing (rather than resolving) complexity and tensions is the name of the game for an E&L leader. Part of that management is learning how to be effective within existing constraints, and part of it is identifying when and how to take an active role in changing the situation.

1 READ CHALLENGES

Read through the challenges in the grid below.

- Which ones resonate with you?
- How do they apply specifically to your situation and context?
- Which ones are limiting the relevance or effectiveness of your E&L function?

2 APPLY IDEAS THAT FIT

For each challenge that you currently face, consider whether you could work better within this constraint and/or whether you have an opportunity and need to influence change. For each scenario, the grid provides actionable ideas to improve your relevance and effectiveness.

Managing common challenges

Challenge	Work with existing constraints	Influence change
<p>Meeting multiple needs. E&L leaders work across dynamic contexts within their foundations and are asked to address a variety of needs and concerns related to E&L from different internal audiences. For instance, executives often want to know if investments are worthwhile, communications staff want to show the value of the foundation's work, and program staff want to grow external impact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through conversations with each audience, ensure understanding and priorities regarding what they need from E&L. • Create a proposal to meet key needs of each audience within the capacity of the E&L team, outlining strategies and timeline. Discuss the proposal with executive leaders to inform a plan with clear priorities for E&L. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a central set of values to guide the E&L role and practices, providing a lens through which to address emerging needs. • Expand the skill sets of the E&L team through professional development and hiring opportunities. • At foundation strategy meetings, propose how E&L can support new directions, conveying resulting shifts and tradeoffs, and resources needed.
<p>Confronting skepticism. E&L leaders often must repeatedly make the case for E&L internally, as questions arise from staff such as: What is the benefit to my work? Where can I find time and space for E&L? What about competing priorities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin all E&L internal communications with reminders of purpose and benefits. • Provide tips and support to help staff fit E&L into their work. • Identify existing E&L proponents on staff and request their support in promoting E&L goals with provided talking points. • Reinforce executive buy-in by articulating alignment between foundation goals and E&L work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve the executive team in improving the learning culture, including designating time and resources for evaluation tasks and learning sessions. • Cultivate E&L champions among program and management staff, giving them tangible actions to support broad buy-in and embedded learning practices. • Share findings and practical insights with staff to demonstrate E&L value.



TOOL

Challenge

Building influence.

E&L leaders' efforts have the potential to strengthen the foundation's work, including by informing strategy, grantmaking, communications, and sharing knowledge with the field—if E&L has the structure and relationships necessary to build influence. Having support from key executives along with relationships and rapport with program teams are key drivers of E&L's influence internally.

Limited capacity.

E&L functions are tasked with meeting the needs of many audiences and issues but often consist of small teams with limited staff capacity. Most E&L departments focus their efforts internally on building culture and supporting programs, which can leave limited time for other tasks such as communications, knowledge sharing, and broadly demonstrating the value of E&L both internally and externally.

Navigating transitions.

Major organizational transitions—such as strategic refreshes, restructuring, and leadership changes—are common across foundations. These transitions can provide opportunities for E&L leads to re-envision their work but also create challenges in terms of continuing momentum, buy-in, and support for evaluation and learning activities among staff.

Work with existing constraints

- If you are not in a position to influence foundation decision making, focus on strengthening relationships with executive and program leaders. Share ideas about how E&L work could support evidence-based decisions and propose concrete steps that would allow the E&L function to demonstrate that value.
- Articulate the different streams of active and desired E&L work with executive leaders to ensure mutual understanding and clear priorities.
- In responding to emerging needs, communicate trade-offs, look for opportunities to streamline, and proactively share responsibility for implementing evaluation and learning practices across foundation staff.
- Create a plan to focus E&L capacity on a specified scope of high-value work, outlining benefits of and strategies for managing demands on the E&L team.

In response to a transition:

- Meet with new leaders to learn about their experience with and hopes for E&L. Share ongoing E&L work, guiding principles, and ideas for the future.
- Refresh staff on the value of E&L activities and their roles in creating that value.

Influence change

- Propose that E&L staff be part of decision-making and organizational efforts (e.g., DEI, learning) to provide the E&L lens. Come to meetings prepared with lessons and insights drawn from E&L data and experience that can inform the discussion.
 - Seek opportunities to share E&L practices or insights with the evaluation, foundation, and/or nonprofit sectors, including partnering with communications staff or peer organizations.
 - Discuss with executive staff a list of potential E&L roles that could be filled with additional capacity, noting how they would address foundation needs and the resources necessary to implement them.
 - Consider how external contractors could fill roles beyond current capacity of staff, including on equity work.
 - Tap into peer connections at other foundations to avoid reinventing the wheel on E&L practices and for ideas on expanding E&L capacity.
- To proactively guide a transition:
- Provide input on organizational transitions to help shape strategic shifts based on evidence or ensure new leadership buy-in of E&L.



Building Your Path Forward

SECTION THREE

ACROSS FOUNDATIONS, E&L HAS COMMONALITIES—AND CLEAR DIFFERENCES

The precise function of evaluation and learning at your foundation, as well as your role in it, is unique. Each foundation is propelled by its own mission in a particular context with an E&L function tailored to its interests.

The path you take to develop your role as an E&L leader likewise will be your own. You will determine which relationships to cultivate and what levers you can pull to work towards your goals, finding opportunities to lean into gaining greater buy-in on learning, for instance, or to prioritize increasing community partnership in evaluation.

At the same time, E&L leaders in other foundations face many of the same day-to-day questions and types of decisions that you do. With those peers as a resource and support—in part through this guide, but also through your professional connections—you are not alone on your journey. Taking time to

reflect, observe and listen, ask questions, and bounce ideas off your foundation colleagues and E&L peers, you can manage your own learning and growth, not only making your job more fulfilling but benefitting your team, foundation, and peers in the field.

If the decision of which step to take first is difficult, consider the questions on the following page to help you prioritize or spark ideas.

In conclusion, we hope this brief offers practical guidance that new and existing E&L leaders can use to navigate their roles in support of more effective and equitable philanthropy. We wish you good luck on this important journey.

“I’ve always wanted us to be engaged with our peers and with our field. It’s critically important that we [evaluation and learning leaders at foundations] become a community of practice. It’s how we learn and grow and get better at what we do.”

KAUFFMAN FOUNDATION EVALUATION
AND LEARNING LEADER



What are your needs and opportunities in developing your role as an E&L leader?

FOUNDATIONAL NEEDS

If you answer 'no' to any of these questions, you have found an essential starting place for establishing yourself as an E&L leader.

Purpose

Is the purpose of the E&L function clear to you?

Organizational Content

Are you attuned to how organizational elements (including structure, relationships, resources, and learning culture) in your foundation after the E&L function?

Priority Setting

Do you have a clear sense of how to meet key E&L needs given your staff and resource capacity?

ONGOING RELEVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS

Once foundational needs are met, these questions can help steer you to opportunities to strengthen your multi-faceted expertise as an E&L leader.

Promoting Equity

What examples within your foundation or elsewhere have caught your attention as effective approaches to learning and equity efforts? In what ways do you and your team define and model your values regarding learning and equity?

Involving Community

What would the foundation—and E&L—need to do to be able to build a collaborative partnership with communities that lessens the inherent power dynamic between funder and community?

Managing Polarities

To what extent do the tensions inherent in the E&L role feel like obstacles rather than management challenges you can master?

Integrating E&L

How could integrating and embedding E&L into the foundation's processes advance the organization's goals? What would that take?

Cultivating Learning

What leverage do you have to take subtle or bold actions to integrate learning and encourage broad ownership of learning at your foundation?

A smooth, light-brown stone sphere rests on a surface of sand with intricate, wavy patterns. The sand is a mix of light and dark brown tones, creating a textured, almost abstract background. The sphere is positioned on the right side of the frame, casting a soft shadow to its right. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative.

Appendices

SECTION FOUR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this guide has relied on the support of many. The James Irvine Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Center for Evaluation Innovation, and Kresge Foundation generously provided funding and/or in-kind support for this endeavor. We are grateful to the following individuals for their thought partnership and advice about the framing of the study and needs of evaluation and learning leaders in foundations: Anna Cruz (Kresge Foundation), Brett Hembree (Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation), Chera Reid (Center for Evaluation Innovation), Fontane Lo (Blue Shield of California Foundation), Jessica Mindnich (Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation),

Julia Coffman (Center for Evaluation Innovation), Kim Ammann Howard (James Irvine Foundation), Matthew Carr (Walton Family Foundation), and Yvonne Belanger (Barr Foundation).

We also thank evaluation and learning leaders and stakeholders for participating in interviews, offering their experiences and insights, all of whom are listed in Appendix A.

Our team at Engage R+D, responsible for designing and implementing the study as well as writing the guide, includes Clare Nolan, Anna Saltzman, and Cristina Whyte. Our partner, Katherine Lee, supported the writing.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Respondent Name	Role Represented at Time of Interview	Foundation Perspective Represented at Time of Interview
Kim Ammann Howard	Director of Impact Assessment and Learning	The James Irvine Foundation
Charles Fields	Vice President of Program Implementation	The James Irvine Foundation
Kelley Gulley	Initiative Director for Better Careers, member of IA&L team	The James Irvine Foundation
Don Howard	President and CEO	The James Irvine Foundation
Fontane Lo	Senior Impact Assessment and Learning Officer	The James Irvine Foundation
Andre Oliver	Initiative Director for Fair Work	The James Irvine Foundation
Jeanne Sakamoto	Chief of Staff and Planning	The James Irvine Foundation
Amy Saxton	Vice President of Program Development	The James Irvine Foundation
Mike Smith	Director of Communications	The James Irvine Foundation
Kathleen Boyle Dalen	Chief Talent, Integration, and Culture Officer	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Matthew Carr	Director of Evaluation at Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Philip Gaskin	Vice President of Entrepreneurship	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Wendy Guillies	President and CEO	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Brett Hembree	Senior Analyst, Evaluation	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Gloria Jackson-Leathers	Vice President of Kansas City Civic	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Larry Jacob	Vice President of Public Affairs	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Aaron North	Vice President of Education	The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation
Rebecca Chamberlain-Creanga	Internal Communications Officer	The Kresge Foundation
Anna Cruz	Strategic Learning and Evaluation Officer	The Kresge Foundation
Lois DeBacker	Managing Director, Environment	The Kresge Foundation
David Fukuzawa	Managing Director, Health	The Kresge Foundation
Rip Rapson	President and CEO	The Kresge Foundation
Chera Reid	Director of Strategic Learning, Research and Evaluation	The Kresge Foundation
Maria Rosario Jackson	Senior Advisor	The Kresge Foundation
Ariel (Ari) Simon	Vice President of Programs and Chief Strategy Officer	The Kresge Foundation

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This appendix includes resources for further reading about E&L practices at foundations and guidance on supporting these functions.

- Bare J. 2010. **Philanthropy, Evaluation, Accountability, and Social Change.** *The Foundation Review*, 1(4).
Author from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation calls for a shift toward more meaningful evaluation in philanthropy.
- Beer, T., Patrizi, P., & Coffman, J. (2021). **Holding Foundations Accountable for Equity Commitments.** *The Foundation Review*, 13(2).
This article explores how established processes within foundations have allowed them to maintain their power. It argues for substantial shifts in decision-making structures so that communities and grantees are holding funders accountable for their equity commitments.
- Cascadia Consulting Group. July 2016. **Planning for Monitoring, Learning, and Evaluation at Small- to Medium-Sized Foundations: A Review.** The Oak Foundation.
Trends and best practices from a study of how foundations address monitoring, evaluation, and learning.
- Center for Evaluation Innovation. January 2020. **Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practices 2020.**
Presents findings on evaluation and learning practices drawn from a 2019 survey of 161 foundations, including comparisons to 2015, 2012, and 2009 data.
- Coffman J. April 2016. **Oh for the Love of Sticky Notes! The Changing Role of Evaluators Who Work with Foundations.** Center for Evaluation Innovation.
Coffman's perspective on how evaluation in philanthropy has changed over the decades and the implications for evaluators' roles and skills.
- Coffman J, Beer T. 2016. **How Do You Measure Up? Finding Fit Between Foundations and Their Evaluation Functions,** *The Foundation Review*, 8(4) Article 6.
An article arguing that there is no one right model for a foundation's evaluation function, with guidance for assessing how the structure, position, focus, resources, and practices of its evaluation function can best fit its needs and aspirations.
- Dean-Coffey J. 2017. **Equitable Evaluation Framework™.** Equitable Evaluation Initiative.
The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ provides rationale, principles, and related resources for redefining evaluation to be in service of equity.
- David T, Enright K. October 2015. **The Source Codes of Foundation Culture.** Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO).
A whitepaper providing a framework for thinking about the underlying influences shaping a foundation's organizational culture.
- Engage R+D. 2020. **Listening for change: Evaluators of color speak out about experiences with foundations and evaluation firms.** The James Irvine Foundation.
A learning brief that explores perspectives of evaluators of color who work regularly with philanthropic clients in California
- Equitable Evaluation Initiative, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. 2021. **Shifting the evaluation paradigm: The Equitable Evaluation Framework (EEF)™.**
The Equitable Evaluation Framework™ provides rationale, principles, and related resources for redefining evaluation to be in service of equity. This publication includes guidance on translating the framework into practice.
- Equity in the Center. **Awake to Woke to Work: Building a Race Equity Culture.**
This report provides research-based context and actionable steps to shift your organization's culture and practices to advance race equity.
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. June 2015. **Learning Together: Actionable Approaches for Grantmakers.**
A publication looking at what it means to open learning and evaluation practices to grantees, peer funders, and other stakeholders.

- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. 2017. **Is Grantmaking Getting Smarter? A National Study of Philanthropic Practice.**
A report on longitudinal trends and new findings on grantmaker practices nationwide based on 20 years of research, including a periodic field survey.
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. May 2019. **Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook.**
An orientation for staff and board members interested in thinking about and moving forward in their organization's learning work.
- Kennedy Leahy S, Wegmann S, Nolen L. 2016. **Through the Looking Glass: Foundation Evaluation and Learning and the Quest for Strategic Learning.**
The Foundation Review, 8(5). Reports on a 2015 study by the Episcopal Health Foundation on how foundations are beginning to incorporate strategic learning, a relatively new lens for philanthropy.
- Krenn H. December 2021. **Doing evaluation in service of racial equity.**
W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
A three-part series of practice guides that show how to incorporate racial equity as a core value into evaluation.
- Lopez A. October 2019. **How Leaders Affect Evaluation Capacity Building in Foundations.**
Center for Evaluation Innovation.
Argues that foundation leaders and evaluation consultants can build foundation capacity to conduct and use evaluation effectively. The "ECB Leadership Framework" defines four interdependent concepts that affect the success of evaluation capacity building.
- Monitor Institute. October 2015. **Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation M&E Landscape.**
Monitor Institute by Deloitte.
Results of a study of over 40 foundations, other organizations, and monitoring and evaluation field specialists to identify design characteristics of high-performing measurement and evaluation units.
- Monitor Institute. 2017. **Reimagining Measurement: A Better Future for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.**
Monitor Institute by Deloitte.
Collected examples and action items to support the idea that shifting attitudes and practices of monitoring, evaluation, and learning can improve decision making, promote DEI, and strengthen learning at scale.
- Patrizi P, Heid Thompson E. 2011. **Beyond the Veneer of Strategic Philanthropy.**
The Foundation Review, 2(3).
Argues that although strategic philanthropy has been in vogue for several decades, most foundations have not fully engaged with the concept and have only partially implemented it. The article calls for foundations to integrate a learning process about their past grantmaking in order to make it more strategic.
- Preskill H, Cook J, McCann C, McConnico C, Shields A, Duffy M. January 2019. **Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning.** FSG and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.
A paper and toolkit for grantmakers to engage their boards and trustees in continuous strategic learning focused on effecting social change in rapidly changing, complex environments.
- Preskill H, Mack K. August 2013. **Building a Strategic Learning and Evaluation System for Your Organization.** FSG.
A guide for foundations and other organizations interested in building a strategic learning and evaluation system.
- Stachowiak S, Kalra N, Ammann Howard K. October 2020. **Good intentions are not enough: Making evaluations more useful for foundation strategy and practice.** FEAN (Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network).
A FEAN Call to Action brief detailing six key interventions to make evaluations more useful for foundation strategy and practice.
- The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. April 2014. **Benchmarks for Spending on Evaluation.**
Reports on a small study of foundation spending on evaluation to spend wisely.

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

This brief grew out of conversations with evaluation and learning leaders working in foundations across the United States about both the value of evaluation and learning in philanthropy, and the challenges of implementing this function well across diverse institutional contexts. Our intent is to provide practical guidance that new and existing leaders can use to navigate their roles in support of more effective and equitable philanthropy. It is 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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