

# EQUITABLE EVALUATION PROJECT

## Framing Paper

[www.equitableeval.org](http://www.equitableeval.org)

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**The Equitable Evaluation Project aims to advance the conversation about philanthropic approaches to equity by critically examining the role evaluation plays in supporting or inhibiting progress towards equity.** As the number of foundations taking an equity stance continues to grow, we need to examine the “fit” of our existing evaluation approaches with the principles and values that underlie equity-focused grantmaking.

**Our premise is that evaluators have a moral imperative to contribute to equity.**<sup>1</sup> Evaluators of foundation work on equity have a *special* obligation to ensure that their evaluation practices don't reinforce or even exacerbate the inequities that change efforts seek to address.

We think meeting this vision requires critical thought about all aspects of the evaluative process—the questions we ask, the methods we use, the teams we assemble, and the ways we support the use of data and sense-making around findings. Our answers to these questions have substantial implications for both foundations and the evaluation field.

**This framing paper is to set the stage for further conversation around equity in philanthropy and evaluation.** It reflects briefly on the current “state of practice” of equity in both philanthropy and evaluation, and poses questions to consider. The content is based on a combination of a year-long research process that included a thorough review of philanthropic and evaluation literature, environmental scanning of equity work in philanthropy, and interviews with foundations and evaluators, as well as our own experiences in the field and conversations with other practitioners.

### EQUITY APPROACHES IN PHILANTHROPY

**Building on a long history of work by social justice groups, philanthropy is showing a burgeoning interest in equity.** One indicator of this interest is the growing attendance at formal

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<sup>1</sup> We take an inclusive approach to defining “evaluator.” We are referring to foundation evaluation staff, evaluation consultants who provide services to foundations, and other evaluation partners (e.g., grantees, evaluation thought leaders).

and informal gatherings of funders of all types and sizes that are experimenting with approaches to advancing equity both internally in their organizations and externally through their grantmaking, joining those funders who have been working in this space for decades. The 2017 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Learning conference, for example, featured multiple sessions on this topic that attracted standing-room only participation.

The Joint Affinity Groups (now known as Change Philanthropy and comprised of all of the identity affinity groups) defined equity as follows: “We will have achieved equity when one can no longer predict advantage or disadvantage based on race/ethnicity, gender and gender identity, or ability.”<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing on racial equity, but note the need to consider how the frame of equitable evaluation may apply more broadly.

Amidst all of this interest, the Philanthropic Initiative to Advance Racial Equity, Association of Black Foundation Executives, Collective Impact Forum, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, authors of articles in several issues of *The Foundation Review*,<sup>3,4,5</sup> and many other thought leaders have issued a challenge to philanthropy:

***Move beyond public statements of commitment to equity and diversity toward deeper action on the historical and structural drivers that keep inequities in place—including how foundations exercise power.***

Several things are revealed when a closer look is taken at how philanthropy is responding to this call.

**Foundations are taking approaches to advancing equity that reflect different theories of change and levels of attention to the drivers of inequities.** The foundations included in our scan are taking one, or sometimes more than one, of the following approaches in their equity work:

- **Comprehensive change:** Building an equity focus into the whole foundation both internally in its operations and culture and externally through its grantmaking. Efforts focus on re-engineering many aspects of how a foundation works, with the goal of reflecting principles of equity in policies, practices, procedures, and people. This work can include everything from diversifying the board and staff, to rewriting organizational policies on pay, employee leave, and performance assessments, to cultivating new norms of respect, inclusion, and transparency in grantmaking.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://philanthropynewsdigest.org/commentary-and-opinion/philanthropy-diversity-and-equity>

<sup>3</sup> Arno, R., Casteel, L., Guajardo, M., & Mansanares, A. (2012). How inclusion and equity are transforming a foundation and a community. *The Foundation Review*, 4(4), 14-27.

<sup>4</sup> *The Foundation Review*. Vol 6 Issue 1 (2014). Racial Equity.

<sup>5</sup> Dean-Coffey, J., Casey, J., & Caldwell, L.D. (2014). Raising the bar—Integrating cultural competence and equity: Equitable evaluation. *The Foundation Review*, 6(2), 81-94.

- **Systems change:** Addressing the systemic barriers that create inequities. Grantmaking focused on systems change commonly supports advocacy, community organizing, and civic engagement, supporting power building among communities so that they can better shape the systems that affect them. For example, in addition to (or instead of) delivering culturally tailored health care services, this approach might focus on changing the norms and policies that cause or enable health disparities (e.g., community engagement, consultation, and decision making in city planning; standards of culturally competent service delivery).
- **Targeted equity:** Choosing a specific population or aspect of inequity as the programmatic focus (e.g., income inequality, racial inequities; Latinxs, Native Americans, African Americans). Some funders, for example, take a “culture-matching” approach that develops, implements, and disseminates approaches that match or reflect the historical, cultural, and social needs of particular populations or communities of color (e.g., culturally tailored service delivery approaches or locations).
- **Diversity and inclusion:** Aiming for greater diversity and inclusion in staffing, funding, or decision making. Some foundations emphasize expanding the proportion of people of color among foundation leaders, board members, staff, and grantees. Others focus on how funding decisions are made and who makes them (e.g., sharing decision making power with affected communities).
- **Equality:** Improving access to, or quality of, systems or services for all populations. This “rising tide raises all boats” approach is based on the expectation that improved systems or services for everyone will improve outcomes for those experiencing inequities. It may not, however, make up for the deficits in resources and opportunity experienced by historically oppressed populations.

While many of these approaches may be a good starting point, not all are likely to shift power imbalances and reduce inequities in education, health, wealth or any other complex social problems philanthropy seeks to address.

**Funders are institutionalizing their equity work to varying degrees.** As the list of approaches illustrates, on one end of the spectrum, foundations are undergoing wholesale organizational re-structuring to reflect principles of equity in all aspects of their work. These foundations are asking how their grantmaking in every program area—e.g., health care, poverty alleviation, education, environment, democratic participation, reproductive rights, peace and security—relates to power and equity.<sup>6</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, foundations are experimenting with equity work in ways that do not also fundamentally change the way they operate and fund. They create standalone

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<sup>6</sup><http://putnam-consulting.com/resources/articles/special-topics/the-road-to-achieving-equity-findings-and-lessons-from-a-field-scan-of-foundations-that-are-embracing-equity-full-article/>

initiatives that dedicate targeted dollars to equity work, but are likely to continue using their same underlying policies and approaches. Or they may commit to gathering feedback from communities of color without addressing how decisions within the foundation are made or without reducing restrictions on the use of funds so grantees have more decision making power.

**Equity work in foundations often focuses either internally or externally—and less often on both.**

Many foundations have begun their equity journey committing considerable resources and time to examining their own organizational processes, practices, and policies. Others have focused externally on how their grant strategies and relationships promote equity, putting dollars toward addressing policies and systemic barriers that reinforce inequity—and sometimes making grant decisions in collaboration with communities of color.

We suspect the number of funders who appear to focus *either* internally *or* externally is a feature of how new equity work is to many foundations, as well as different takes on where to start and how much change an organization can manage at once. Real change likely requires deep attention to both internal and external practices, policies, norms, and relationships. Foundations who design equity grantmaking without attention to their own internal processes are at risk of missing key drivers of inequity in their own ways of working and not “walking the talk.” Those who focus only on the internal aspects of equity work risk getting trapped in a mindset that their internal house must be in perfect order before they can do external equity work, and thus have little real impact on the communities in which they fund.

**Our intent here is not to judge the approaches that different foundations have taken; it is to point out that different approaches have different implications for the evaluation questions that get asked and results that can be expected.** For example, foundations focused on comprehensive change should expect their evaluation policies, procedures, and approaches to reflect an easily observable commitment to equitable values and principles. Strategies focused on equality should expect results related to how rights and services are applied, but not necessarily related to the elimination of disparities in outcomes. Efforts focused on diversity should expect changes in the quantity or fair inclusion of underrepresented groups, but not necessarily in the quality of those groups’ experiences (unless they also are focused on inclusion).

## EVALUATION AND EQUITY IN PHILANTHROPY

**The evaluation field has also been exploring its relationship to equity.** These advancements taking place among evaluators are built on the same principles of inclusion and social justice that underlie equity-focused grantmaking. To cite a handful of examples:

- The American Evaluation Association has given some purposeful attention to this topic through, for example, adoption of a Cultural Competence Statement in 2013 and a 2014 annual conference theme focused on ***Visionary Evaluation for a Sustainable, Equitable Future.***

- There is a growing practice of evaluation approaches like participatory and empowerment evaluation that explicitly account for the power imbalances and inequities that conventional evaluation approaches can reinforce.
- The increasing use of systems thinking in evaluation is helping evaluators to understand how to identify and evaluate changes related to the systemic drivers of inequity.
- Fellowship and internship programs like the Graduate Education Diversity Internship Program (GEDI) and Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity (LEEAD) are aiming to increase the diversity of the evaluation field itself.
- The Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign brings researchers together to address the growing need for policy-relevant studies that take seriously the influences of cultural norms, practices, and expectations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social and educational interventions.

**But just as foundations are taking different approaches in their work on equity, so too are evaluators.** Evaluators may have diverse teams, for example, but still fail to use culturally competent practices. Others may use culturally competent evaluation practices, but pay little attention to evaluating the systemic drivers of inequities. Still others may examine systemic drivers but fail to include affected communities in defining the focus or approach to the evaluation, or in the interpretation of data and sense-making, or as key decision makers in the evaluation. There is not yet a consistent understanding in the field of common standards of practice around what evaluation practice of equity efforts—and equitable evaluation more broadly—should look like.

**Few foundations—even those focused on comprehensive reforms in service of equity—have considered how their evaluative practices need to change to support equity.** Evaluation seems to be among the last organizational functions to be examined and revamped through an equity lens. Foundations who commit to a focus on equity but fail to consider how their evaluation approaches might need to shift are at risk of limiting or impeding their efforts and ultimately their success.

While many evaluators are thinking hard about ways to improve evaluation’s contribution to equity efforts, they typically run up against some familiar roadblocks:

- Funders of evaluation often fail to commit to the time, effort, and shift in mindset that equitable evaluation requires.
- Equity evaluation work can be easily swamped by conventional (often inequitable) thinking about accountability and evaluation.

**Over time, the philanthropic sector has developed a set of evaluation “orthodoxies,” or tightly held beliefs about evaluative practice.**<sup>7</sup> Orthodoxies are often invisible, masquerading as

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<sup>7</sup> The Monitor Institute brought the term “orthodoxies” into the philanthropic sector’s thinking on evaluation through a large-scale project to redesign foundation evaluation to improve use. They define orthodoxies as “deeply held beliefs about

“common sense.” They are believed to be foundational and affect the undercurrents of organizational culture. Both foundations and evaluators who work in philanthropy have shaped the orthodoxies around philanthropic evaluation. These orthodoxies influence what kind of evaluative work is viewed as important, whom evaluation serves, what evaluation should be used for, and what constitutes high quality evaluation practice.

**Many of the current orthodoxies in evaluation act like a drag on equity efforts, and in some cases, reinforce inequities.** Our research uncovered the following orthodoxies in evaluation that are inconsistent with equity work.

1) The foundation defines what success looks like.

Typically in a foundation, the board or program staff define what constitutes success for strategies with little input from grantees or groups affected by inequities. In some cases, these definitions of success are based on organizational models and literature that have been informed by racial bias and that fail to account for patterns of historic and structural discrimination. Resources then flow to organizations whose priorities, performance, and capacity reflect these definitions. Additionally, attention to outcomes linked to these definitions of success without parallel attention to **how** those outcomes are achieved can blind foundations to whether their approach helps to build power and agency or maintains current power arrangements.

2) Grantees and strategies are the evaluand, but not the foundation.

Foundations almost exclusively focus the evaluation lens on their grantees or their programmatic strategies. Rarely is the evaluand the foundation itself, its practices (beyond stakeholder perception surveys), and its strategies. While foundations have begun to examine their own diversity and ask about the diversity of their grantees’ staff and boards, and the diversity of vendors, more fundamental questions about how they have incorporated equity into strategy development, funding priorities, and funding mechanisms is lacking.

3) The foundation is the primary user of evaluation.

Evaluation questions often focus on the foundation’s conceptualization of impact and what **the foundation** needs to learn to make better choices about who and what to fund in order to achieve greater impact. This results in evaluation findings that often offer no real value to the “subjects” of the evaluation (grantees or the communities they serve) and puts decision making about how to move forward in the hands of the foundation alone.

4) Evaluations should provide generalizable lessons.

Evaluations are often designed to provide synthesized, generalized findings that hide unique context, differential outcomes, and historical and structural drivers. This can lead

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‘how things are done’ that often go unstated and unquestioned. You can find them everywhere—in the mind of an individual, the protocols of an organization, even the best practices of an entire industry.”

foundations toward the illusion that generalized approaches work similarly in any community or for any group.

5) Evaluators should be selected based on credentials that reflect traditional notions of expertise.

Evaluators are selected and managed by foundation staff based on a particular set of criteria that typically include academic credentials, subject matter expertise, methodological approach and skill, and history with evaluations of a similar type. These criteria are not necessarily good indicators that evaluators are prepared to evaluate equity efforts. They also restrict the expansion of the evaluator pool as well as potentially the development of new evaluation frameworks that better reflect the principles of equity.

6) Evaluators are the experts and final arbiters.

External experts have long played an extractive role in communities, exhibiting greater commitment to disciplinary conventions and desires of the funder than to the community “under the guise” of the evaluation. Most evaluators (and often the foundation client) both frame and make final decisions about most every step of the evaluation process, including questions, methods, data collection instruments and processes, learning or interpretation events, the format and frequency of deliverables, and how evaluation lessons and findings are disseminated. Shifting the relationship between funder, evaluator, and evaluation participants to be more equitable, and to create evaluative processes that imbue social change agents with data and value their insights which inform their own strategies (and that of the foundation), requires a nonconventional evaluator (compared to the larger field) with specialized training, an explicit values framework, and a different approach to evaluation design and management.

7) Credible evidence comes from quantitative data and experimental research.

Certain kinds of data and evidence have come to be viewed with value and legitimacy in philanthropy. Many foundation boards have come to expect simple quantitative dashboards, and those with particular academic backgrounds often value experimental research designs regardless of their fit to the situation. The field has come to treat with suspicion what is often called “self-reported data” and to dismiss even systematically collected and analyzed qualitative data as merely “stories.”

8) Evaluators are objective.

Evaluators often interpret data and draw conclusions in isolation and without attention to bias. This results in a hierarchy of experts who “know more and know better” than those who are experiencing the work directly, or those who bring a different cultural and historical orientation to knowledge and data. Additionally, interpreting and drawing conclusions from data without the participation of those engaged in and affected by the work inequitably takes ownership of knowledge and decision making power out of their hands.



9) Evaluation funding primarily goes to data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Evaluation budgets often fail to adequately support time needed for relationship building, appropriate testing of culturally competent instruments, or participatory planning, data collection and interpretation, and sharing of lessons. This under-resources evaluation approaches that represent the best fit between evaluation and equity.

## A CALL FOR EQUITABLE EVALUATION

**We believe that evaluators of philanthropic efforts have a moral imperative to approach their work in ways that contribute to equity. We believe this is even more essential for those engaged in efforts specifically related to equity.** This includes a commitment to three principles:

1. Evaluation work is in service of and contributes to equity.

2. Evaluative work can and should answer critical questions about the:

- Effect of a strategy on different populations
- Effect of a strategy on the underlying systemic drivers of inequity
- Ways in which history and cultural context is tangled up in both the structural conditions and the change initiative itself.

“Equitable evaluation weaves the principles of cultural competence... throughout the entire evaluation process... Its primary aim is not only to shed light on equity, but also to analyze and assess interventions, investments and strategies through a lens of promoting equity.”<sup>5</sup>

3. Evaluative work should be designed and implemented in a way that is commensurate with the values underlying equity work:

- Culturally competent
- Multi-culturally valid
- Oriented toward participant ownership

**If we do not work in this way, and if foundations do not support evaluators to work in this way, evaluation practices risk reinforcing or even exacerbating the very inequities the change initiative seeks to address.**

**Our goal is that funders and evaluators of equity efforts commit to “equitable evaluation.”<sup>8</sup>** To align evaluation practices with an equity approach—and even more powerfully, to use evaluation as a tool for advancing equity—evaluators must consider all of these aspects at once:

- Diversity of their teams (beyond ethnic and cultural),
- Cultural appropriateness and validity of their methods,
- Ability of the design to reveal structural and systems-level drivers of inequity,

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<sup>8</sup> Dean-Coffey, J., Casey, J., & Caldwell, L.D. (2014). Raising the bar: Integrating cultural competence and equity: Equitable evaluation. *The Foundation Review*, 6(2), 81-94.



- Degree to which communities have the power to shape and own how evaluation happens.

## NEXT STEPS FOR THE EQUITABLE EVALUATION PROJECT

This framing paper offers a brief take on equity approaches and their evaluation in philanthropy. Many foundations and evaluators alike are evolving in their understanding of how to define and advance equity, acknowledging a need to re-examine their work and apply an equity lens in more meaningful ways. Our understanding of equity and equitable evaluation also is evolving and is not exhaustive.

While we cannot yet provide a definitive list of tools or methods for practicing equitable evaluation, we have seen real-life examples of equitable evaluation in practice, along with foundations making positive movements toward equitable evaluation. We look forward to sharing what we have learned in future postings on the [equitable evaluation project website](#) and through other venues.

**To advance the Equitable Evaluation Project, we encourage you to reflect on your own practices related to equity and equitable evaluation, as well as what can be done to advance the field.** Consider the three sets of difficult questions below intended to push reflection and collective thinking forward.

1. How can our evaluation mindset and practices better reflect **and advance** equity principles and values? What specific practices productively challenge the orthodoxies around evaluation in philanthropy?
2. What does it take for foundations to build their organizational capacity, will, and wherewithal to engage in equitable evaluation? Where and how should foundations start?
3. What can we do at a field level to ensure that more evaluators are prepared to practice equitable evaluation?



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