

The James Irvine Foundation Evaluation Policies and Guidelines

The Evaluation Policies and Guidelines describe the purpose and role of evaluation at Irvine and the roles and responsibilities of respective program staff for evaluation activity.

Philosophy and Goals

Evaluation involves the systematic investigation of the worth, merit or effectiveness of a program or organization. As such, evaluation serves to advance the Foundation's mission by supporting Irvine's efforts to identify and sustain promising approaches, effective solutions, and strong organizations. Overall, evaluation activities enhance the Foundation's role as a responsible, accountable, and effective grantmaker.

The goals for evaluation at Irvine are the following:

1. **Program improvement:** Increase the ability of program staff to design, manage, and disseminate effective grants programs by using credible analysis about what works to inform funding priorities, grantmaking strategies, and program decision-making; and to increase the capacity of our grantees to develop and implement quality and effective programs.
2. **Knowledge generation:** Increase understanding about programs – the characteristics of well-implemented programs, the circumstances in which program strategies work and for whom, and the relationships between program strategies, process and outcomes – among Irvine staff and board, its grantees, and the broader fields in which the Foundation operates.
3. **Accountability:** Ensure continued accountability by Irvine staff, board, and grantees to their respective constituents by measuring, assessing and sharing evidence of the impact of the Foundation's programs.

The Role of Evaluation in Irvine’s Programs

The Foundation undertakes evaluation activity at four levels of its work: 1) Foundation-wide; 2) program area; 3) major clusters of grantmaking or program initiatives; and 4) individual grants.

Level	Information Needs	Methods	Who
Foundation-wide <i>See Irvine Performance Assessment Framework for detail on philosophy and approach.</i>	a) Progress toward and achievement of Foundation-wide goals and priorities. b) The extent to which the Foundation is leveraging its unique standing as a statewide, multi-purpose funder c) The nature and quality of Foundation interactions, communications, and services with its constituencies. d) The Foundation’s investment performance, spending and staff satisfaction related to comparable benchmarks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tracking grants data related to Foundation goals and priorities ▪ External collection of benchmark and trend data ▪ Assessment of communications strategies and products ▪ Customer feedback from a range of stakeholders ▪ Benchmarking range of investment performance and administrative data 	Planning Committee (composed of executive and senior staff at the Foundation)
Program area	Alignment of program area goals to Foundation mission/goals/principles and to external environment. Suggested future directions of a program area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environmental scanning ▪ Strategic review ▪ Annual plans and their internal review 	Program Director with support from Vice President of Programs (VPP) and President
Clusters of grants or program initiatives <i>See Evaluation Map for detail on specific processes and procedures.</i>	The degree to which programs are being well implemented and to which program goals have been achieved by a subset of related grants. Suggested changes in program strategy, resources, or activity to promote greater program results. Program results or experiences that represent new, useful, or practical knowledge to communicate strategically to specific external audiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Logic modeling ▪ External evaluations ▪ Dissemination of results 	Program Director with support from VPP
Individual Grants <i>See detail in files: 1) Grants Monitoring, and 2) Close Out Reports Policy.</i>	Clear goal and objective statements, accomplishment of objectives, use of funds, mid-course corrections needed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring: site visits, observation, review of grantee reports ▪ In select cases, external evaluations ▪ Close-out grant reports for specific cases 	Program Team

Principles

We believe that the Foundation’s approach to evaluation should be timely, practical, and dynamic to reflect the different needs, opportunities, and priorities for evaluation that emanate from the wide range of Irvine’s programs and potential users of the evaluation results. As such, we do not have (nor do we seek) a single “best” approach to evaluation, which could be used in all situations, but rather we propose a set of principles and strategies to guide evaluation design and use.

- Evaluation should not be a stand-alone activity or an after-thought, but involves a disciplined, rigorous process that is ideally embedded in all phases and aspects of our work.
- Evaluation should inform organizational and program decisions and therefore be linked to internal decision-making and planning processes.
- Programs and evaluation work better when anchored in a clear statement of purpose and program theory. The ability of the Foundation to learn from its assessments of individual grants, program strategies, and its overall effectiveness as an organization depends in large part on the degree to which we have articulated upfront clear goals, objectives, and expected outcomes.
- We articulate upfront the purpose, timing, and audience or users of any evaluation to then inform its scope and nature.
- Although we pay attention toward results in our evaluations, we also feel that we must give equal attention to implementation in order to understand how we got there or why we didn’t. This latter approach involves examining the environment in which an organization or program operates and the process involved in its development and implementation. An evaluation of how a program is being implemented can provide a more accurate picture of the relationship between organizational capacity, program activities, and outcomes and can produce information to pinpoint problems early on to improve program operations and performance.
- We seek to involve grantees and other project stakeholders in evaluation planning and implementation, wherever appropriate, in order to enhance understanding of an evaluation, increase stakeholder commitment, and improve the utilization of the results.
- A safe environment must be deliberately created and appropriate mechanisms established for grantees, other project stakeholders and Foundation staff whereby frank assessment and specific information can be communicated to the Foundation without the usual filters. The Foundation is committed to fostering a culture committed to measurement, dedicated to ongoing improvement, and willing to engage in candid discussion when things don’t go as planned.

- In the case of multi-year programs or initiatives, evaluation findings, and recommendations will be provided throughout the course of the program evaluation instead of only at the end in order to provide opportunities for reflection, program improvement, and mid-course corrections.
- In the interest of achieving broader impact, the Foundation will assess the value of evaluation results within the larger field, and, where appropriate, package that information for specific target audiences so that the innovations and lessons in our grant-funded programs may be understood, accepted and adopted in other settings.

Criteria for Funding Evaluations of Program Initiatives or Individual Grants

Irvine has adopted a principle of monitoring its grants comprehensively and evaluating selectively. We therefore invest our evaluation resources mostly in assessing clusters of grants with common strategies or outcomes or program initiatives. Evaluations of these grant clusters or program initiatives allow the Foundation to achieve economies of scale by contracting one external professional evaluator to work across multiple organizations and sites. In addition, the analysis benefits from a variety of programs and experiences to then reveal key information about elements that leads to program success. Grantees also benefit because they gain a broader perspective on the merit of their individual programs, learn about effective approaches to program implementation, and participate in a review and reflection with other like organizations about the best ways to achieve shared goals.

On occasion, Irvine will consider funding for an external evaluation of an individual grant that is not a part of a larger cluster evaluation; and, in making this decision, we will apply the criteria noted below for an evaluation of a cluster of grants. However, our assessment efforts at the individual grant level will mostly be in the form of grants monitoring, as noted above.

Given the complexity, cost, and often ambivalence about evaluation in the field, we carefully determine when it is appropriate to fund an evaluation, taking into consideration the readiness of grantee organizations to participate, level of our funding, and the stage of life of a particular program or initiative. The rule of thumb for resource allocation of an evaluation is 5-12 percent of program costs.

We use the following factors in determining whether to evaluate a cluster of grants:

- Strategic relevance to Foundation goals and approach and/or focus area strategy.
- Program's potential scalability.
- Program model or practices are innovative and have potential to advance the field.
- Program has achieved a certain threshold of maturity and stability.
- The proposed evaluation will be used to inform organizational and program decisions at the Foundation or by grantees and is clearly linked (in substance and timing) to internal decision-making and planning processes.
- Evaluation is used to improve program effectiveness and sustainability and to strengthen grantee organizations or the larger field.

Evaluation Activities at Irvine

Irvine created an Evaluation Office in 1998 to provide strategic support to the Foundation's President, program staff and board in evaluation. As a result of its strategic planning process in 2002-03, the Evaluation Office is now an integral part of the Vice President's Office. The evaluation function is currently staffed by the Vice President of Programs and Special Assistant to the Vice President, and includes the following roles and activities:

1) **Evaluation Planning, Management, and Use:**

- Provide technical support to program staff in the design, management, and use of program evaluation.
- Advise program staff in directing external technical assistance and resources to assist selected grantees to develop their understanding, inclination, and capacity for performance measurement and evaluation.
- Assist program and communications staff in the dissemination of Irvine's program evaluation results.

2) **Staff Professional Development and Organizational Learning:**

- Increase the knowledge and skills of Irvine program staff in evaluation and ensure their application in program planning and grantmaking processes.
- Organize informal or formal training activities to address common grantmaking issues, including venues and opportunities for staff to engage in evaluation findings, build upon each other's expertise, and learn from one another.

3) **Data Analysis:**

- Analyze grants and evaluation data to capture program activity, outcomes, and lessons, using dashboard formats and other qualitative assessments, to inform program development, grantmaking activity, and an assessment of the Foundation's impact and effectiveness.

Irvine's approach to evaluation is designed to be collaborative by involving program staff fully in the evaluation process. It is Irvine's belief that evaluation findings will be more meaningful to stakeholders, more useful to decision makers, and more effective within the Foundation if program staff are given the primary responsibility for developing the evaluation questions and managing the evaluator. Program and evaluation staff are engaged together in dialogue, reflection and deliberation with the external evaluator about the interpretation of findings and about indicated programmatic action. In this model, program and evaluation work are closely intertwined, and evaluation staff at Irvine serve as technical support, mediators, and champions of evaluation at the Foundation.