IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING FRAMEWORK

WHY DO WE ENGAGE IN IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING?

The Irvine Foundation's goals are to expand economic and political opportunity for families and young adults who are working but struggling with poverty. Impact assessment and learning (IA&L) helps the staff and board advance these goals in three ways:

Guiding our strategy and grantmaking

It helps us decide where we invest and how, what the impact of our investments is, and when we need to shift to make sure that we are most effectively using our resources and talents.

Supporting us in being accountable and transparent

It positions us to share, internally and externally, what we are doing and why, as well as what we are learning, and how we are applying that learning.

Enhancing our field impact

We share what we learn, successes and challenges, with the fields and sectors in which we work, especially our nonprofit, public sector, and philanthropic colleagues. We do so with the intent of informing their work and augmenting our impact (e.g., through cofunding, model replication, and scaling). We also look to others to guide our efforts and enhance our impact.

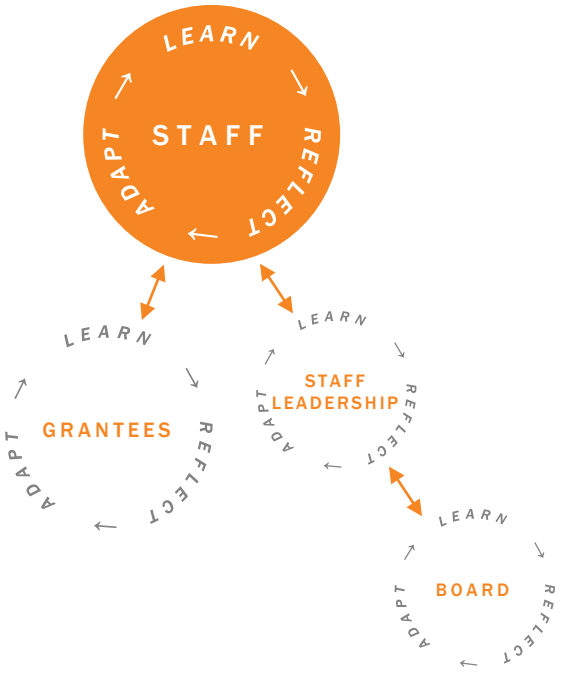
We define **IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING** as the processes we use to measure our progress and impact in meeting our goals. We collect a variety of quantitative and qualitative information through different methods including pre-grant due diligence, grant monitoring, grantee site visits, grantee-funder convenings, targeted research, evaluation, community listening sessions, and grantee perception surveys. We regularly synthesize and reflect on the information we gather to inform decisions about our work and consider adjustments that will enhance our impact.

WHY AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING FRAMEWORK?

We developed the IA&L Framework to ensure that Irvine staff and board, are clear about our approach to impact assessment and learning. This includes: (1) how we are holding ourselves accountable to assess our progress and impact against our portfolio goals and outcomes, and (2) how we will learn and apply that learning to inform decisions about our strategy on an ongoing basis.

This necessitates our engagement in two critical practices. First, strategy, and impact assessment and learning, must regularly inform each other. Strategy needs to inform how we assess our progress and learn. Conversely, what we learn from assessing our progress needs to inform our strategy.

The second practice involves assessment activities feeding into an ongoing cycle of learning, reflecting, and adapting to facilitate continuous improvement. Staff are most deeply involved in this practice and to different extents collaboratively engage with grantees. In our learning approaches, we always aim to enhance grantees' effectiveness in reaching their goals in addition to informing our own efforts. In addition, the board and staff leadership periodically engage in learning in ways that build on this practice by staff.



HOW ARE WE EVOLVING OUR IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING APPROACH?

Our IA&L Framework is influenced by best practices in evaluation and learning and builds on our own experiences. We are intentionally evolving our approach to match our new goals and grantmaking initiatives, as well as a desire to more closely integrate impact assessment and learning with strategy. The application of this framework is especially timely as we move into a new way of working with:

- Cross-functional initiative teams in which most portfolio staff work on more than one initiative
- Greater partnership with grantees to develop initiatives
- The launch of multi-year initiatives with specified time frames and outcomes
- A portfolio approach designed for greater impact than the sum of individual initiatives

With these changes, we have shifted our IA&L efforts in the following ways:

- Developing and implementing IA&L plans for all new initiatives at their launch
- Less emphasis on measuring past impact and greater emphasis on forward-looking information that informs the work of the Foundation and grantees
- Greater engagement of staff, leadership, the board, and grantees in continuous improvement processes
- Broadening and strengthening our listening and feedback practices with grantees and our ultimate beneficiaries

WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING?

The Foundation board, staff leadership, staff, and grantees all have a role in being accountable for impact assessment and learning.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The **Board** has a significant accountability role, asking hard questions about what success looks like, ensuring we are most effectively using resources, and providing strategic advice, guidance, and decision making based on what we learn.

Staff Leadership is accountable to ensure that the organizational culture supports and incentivizes learning and continuous improvement and that impact assessment and learning is integrated with strategy and adequately resourced and prioritized.

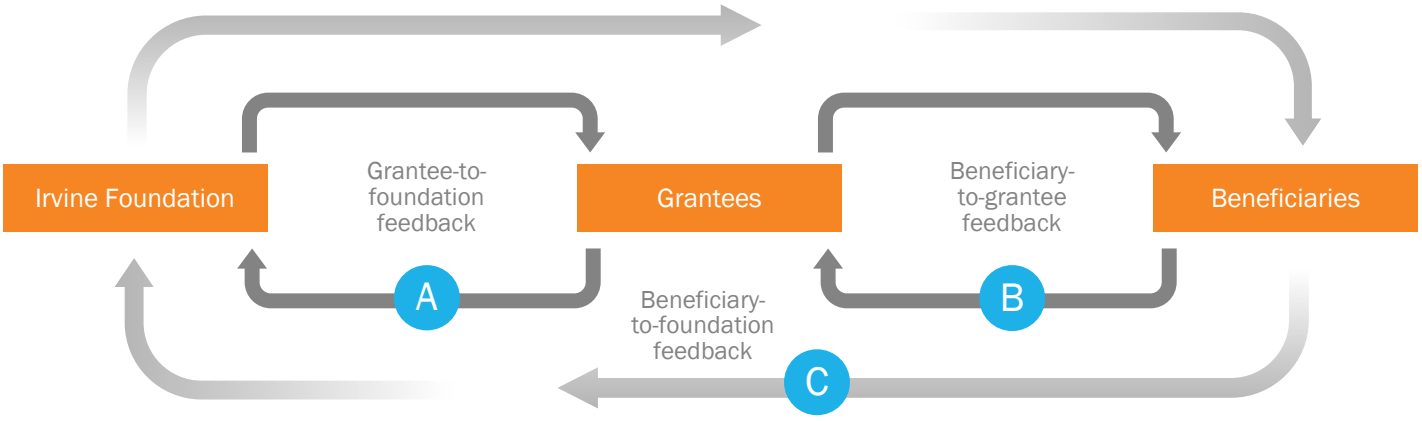
Staff are accountable to learn from initiative implementation, make adjustments that increase the odds of success, and ensure that staff leadership and the board have the information they need for their accountability role.

Grantees are accountable for laying out a plan of work and reporting on implementation, impact, and what they are learning (e.g., grant proposals and reporting). We also ask grantees to be part of collective learning efforts with us.

HOW DO WE INCORPORATE FEEDBACK FROM GRANTEES AND BENEFICIARIES INTO OUR WORK?

We are accountable to our ultimate beneficiaries: **Californians who are working but struggling with poverty**. As a result, we are committed to broadening and strengthening our feedback practices — asking and listening, using what we hear to inform our work, and letting those we listen to know how we used what we learned.

This takes place in a number of ways, including feedback loops with **grantees (A)** through grantee perception surveys, engagement in strategy development, and grantee gatherings. We also support our grantees in their own feedback loops with **those they serve (B)** through our participation in the Fund for Shared Insight, support of Listen for Good grants, and other efforts. Lastly, we seek feedback from **our ultimate beneficiaries (C)** through efforts such as our recent Community Listening Sessions.



WHAT PRINCIPLES GUIDE IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING?

The following principles guide our IA&L efforts — both our approach and partnerships. While these principles are relevant to IA&L efforts across the Foundation, they most frequently apply to our work within initiatives. These principles have been informed by discussions with the Irvine board, staff, and grantees, and align with best practices from the field.

OUR APPROACH

- We are clear about the **purpose and audience** for the specific IA&L activity.
- We **cultivate a learning culture** that supports innovation, experimentation, reflection, flexibility, and adaptation.
- We use **multiple data collection methods** and gather information from diverse perspectives (e.g., grantees, beneficiaries, other key stakeholders). This allows us to learn about our own work, the relevant work of others, and the broader context that influences our impact.
- We prioritize gathering information that helps **identify when adjustments need to be made** in real time. This includes seeking to understand not only what's happening, but why — the factors that are facilitating or impeding progress.
- We **share what we learn** with others, including grantees, partners, the field, and beneficiaries.

OUR PARTNERSHIPS

- We collaborate with our grantees and other partners to design and implement IA&L efforts. In doing, so we seek to:
    - Ensure that IA&L is **reflective of the needs and priorities** of grantees and the field;
    - **Level or balance the power dynamic** between Irvine as the funder and grantees to create strong and candid relationships. For all of our partnerships, we seek to use a diversity, equity, and inclusion approach; and
    - **Increase our individual and collective capacity** to gather and use data in the process.
- We make every effort to ensure that our **grantee ask is appropriate** given the amount and type of resources we provide and the usefulness of the information to be collected.
- We seek to avoid processes that are burdensome for staff, grantees, and beneficiaries. Where possible, we **build on existing efforts** (e.g., data grantees already collect) and **streamline efforts** (e.g., use information grantees provide to other funders).

HOW DO WE FOCUS OUR IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING EFFORTS?

We need to make decisions about when, where, and how to spend finite resources and staff time; this is especially the case when we make decisions about external evaluations. The following factors help us more effectively focus these efforts:

Life cycle of an initiative. Information needs will vary and be heightened at key points of an initiative, such as when decisions need to be made to continue or exit an initiative, to renew or augment specific grants, or to increase resources for scaling. We will prioritize use of resources for evaluations that can inform critical decision points.

Capacity. Our use of resources must also take into account the capacity of grantees and our partners to gather, use, and report data. We seek to take advantage of contexts in which quality data exists, while also recognizing that some situations may require strategic investments in capacity to yield evaluative information.

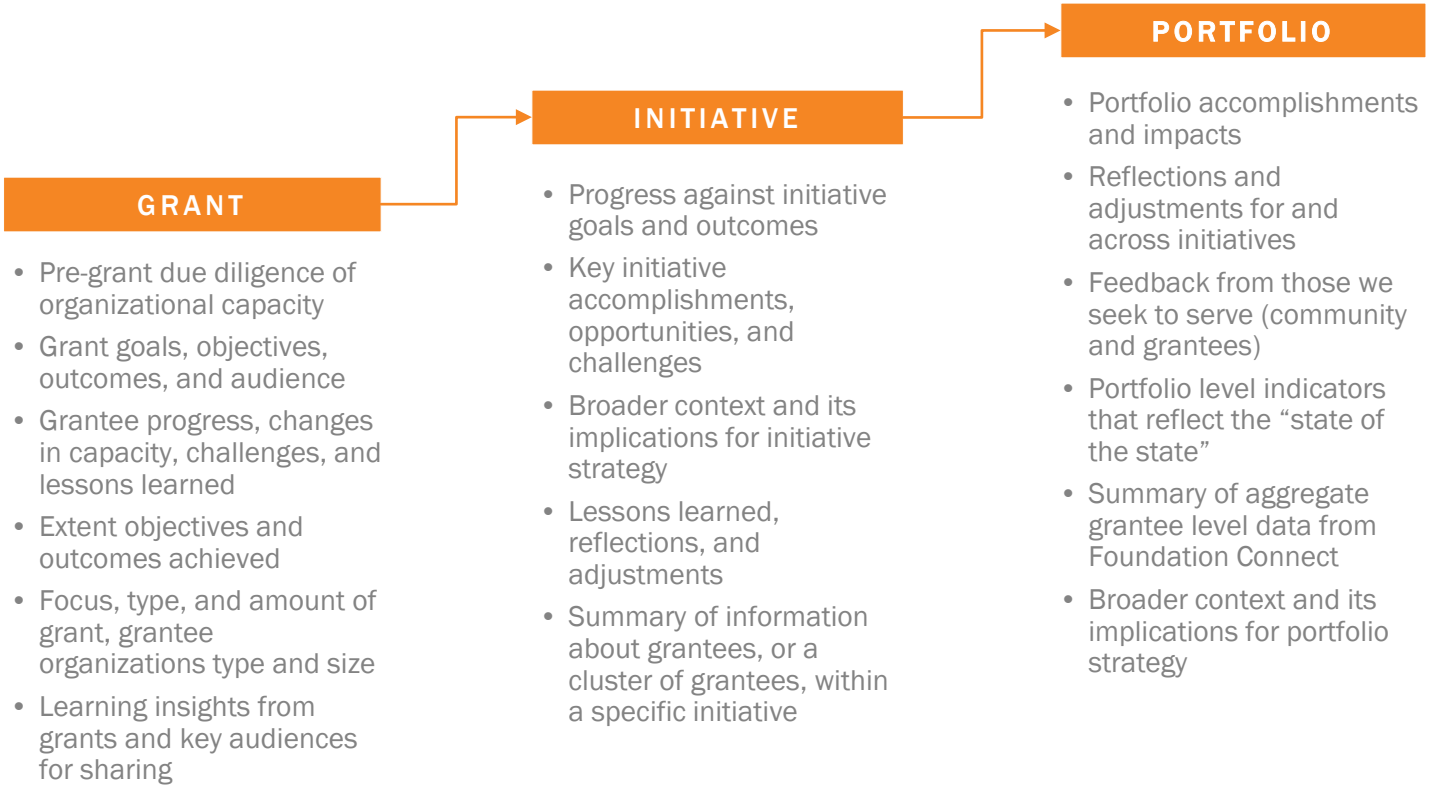
Standard of proof. We recognize that not all data are created equal. Some types of evaluation yield rigorous assessment of the impact of program models while others favor rapid feedback that can inform more adaptive initiatives. We prioritize evaluation approaches that are appropriate to the nature of specific interventions, their stage of development, and evidence of effectiveness from similar efforts.

Measurability. Some things are harder to measure than others, and our efforts need to align with what can realistically be measured. For example, when assessing a career training program, discrete quantitative outcomes can be used to measure tangible impact on participants overtime (e.g., change in hourly wage and career progression). In contrast, efforts to influence systems change, such as passage of a state policy, typically rely on proxy measures (e.g., framing and frequency of related discussions) to indicate progress toward the desired outcome (e.g., policy passage).

HOW DO WE PUT IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING INTO PRACTICE?

As part of impact assessment and learning, **we collect and reflect on different types of information at the grant, initiative, and portfolio levels**. This information is used in a variety of ways, not only within, but across the three levels. For example, learning at the grant level informs learning at the initiative and portfolio levels (e.g., interim grant reports within a specific initiative can be reviewed to assess the extent to which outcomes are being achieved and key challenges facing grantees' progress. A similar analysis can take place across all grants within the portfolio).

We also collect and reflect on different elements of our **internal operations** to ensure that each one most effectively supports the implementation of our strategy and grantmaking.



WHAT DOES IMPACT ASSESSMENT & LEARNING LOOK LIKE ACROSS THE FOUNDATION?

From this point forward, all new initiatives will have an IA&L plan. This plan will be developed by the launch of each initiative and updated as each initiative evolves. At least annually, the plan will be reviewed for needed adjustments due to changing assessment and learning needs and opportunities.

Elements of IA&L Initiative Plans

Purpose and audience for IA&L

Multiyear goals and outcomes of the Initiative

Assessment and learning questions/hypotheses

Methods to answer assessment and learning questions/hypotheses

- *Design/approach, including strengths and challenges*
- *Key relevant context*
- *Data collection tools and data sources*
- *Processes for regular data synthesis, sharing, reflection, and adaptation*

Key products and their use
(e.g., for decision making, to inform the field, and to enhance grantee effectiveness)

Grantee engagement
(i.e., how grantees are involved in the IA&L design and implementation and how they and their beneficiaries will benefit from IA&L efforts)

Capacity and resource needs

- *Budget*
- *Staffing allocations and roles (program staff, IA&L staff, consultants)*
- *Assessment of IA&L capacity for staff and grantees and needed supports*

Timeline

We also pursue IA&L efforts outside of new initiatives. We are currently examining how to strengthen existing IA&L processes at the grant, portfolio, and internal operations level and have a variety of IA&L efforts underway for our current and culminating initiatives (e.g., Arts Engagement, Immigrant Integration, and Linked Learning).

As we enter into our new way of working, we also are developing IA&L practices to reflect on different phases that lead to the launch of new initiatives, including research and development, landscaping, and piloting.

WHAT ARE OUR IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES FOR IA&L?

Since it will take a few years to fully live into this framework, we have chosen some immediate priorities given our internal IA&L capacity, where we are in the launch of our new strategy, and important steps to operationalize the framework. These include:

- Cultivating a learning culture that supports innovation, experimentation, reflection, flexibility, and adaptation
- Building internal and external IA&L capacity on the part of the IA&L team, staff, the board, and grantees
- Harvesting and sharing internal and external learning and knowledge applicable to the work of Irvine, our grantees, and partners
- Applying a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens across IA&L policies, practices, and systems

As we move forward, similar to other work within the Foundation, we expect to learn, reflect, and adjust our IA&L efforts. We look forward to collaborating and learning alongside our colleagues as they pursue similar efforts and to be changed as a result. As always, we welcome input on our approach and practices as we seek for IA&L to contribute to improving the lives of Californians who are working but struggling with poverty.