The Colorado Health Foundation™



Learning and Unlearning: Centering Equity in Our Evaluation Practice

Learning and evaluation have always been central to our practice at The Colorado Health Foundation, because we believe they have the potential to help us be smarter about our work so we can create greater impact at the intersection of health and equity.

Learning and evaluation help us hold ourselves accountable to the communities we exist to serve – always asking the questions of whether we're living into our values, whether the assumptions we have hold true, and whether we're helping communities move the needle on issues of health that are important to them.

Our President and CEO, Karen McNeil-Miller, describes the role of our Learning and Evaluation Department as holding a mirror up to the Foundation – offering an honest assessment of what we're doing well and where we are falling short.

Questioning the Who, What and Why of Evaluation

Since 2017, the department has turned the mirror on our own practices of evaluation as we try and better align our work with principles of equity. In a lucky happenstance, we began this analysis of our Foundation's evaluation approach about the time the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI) formed. A five-year endeavor slated for 2019 to 2023, EEI is building a field of practice around the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF), with a specific focus on philanthropic evaluation.

The EEF lays out a set of principles and orthodoxies that show up in philanthropic evaluation, and provided both a starting point and scaffold for us in thinking about how to shift our own practices to align with principles of equity. The EEF isn't a

recipe for how to do the work. It is an invitation to develop a different relationship with evaluation – to change the way we are being, thinking and doing. In practice, the EEF challenges evaluators to constantly question things like the who, what and why of evaluation:

- Who gets to make choices about this evaluation? Who is making meaning and drawing conclusions about the data?
- What is the focus of the evaluation? Which perspectives are prioritized and which are missing?
- Why are we answering this set of questions? Why are we choosing this particular methodology?

The EEF led us to an ongoing process of both learning and unlearning. We've become more critical thinkers about our evaluation practice, better able to notice and question the choices we're making in every piece of evaluation work – what the evaluation focuses on, who gets to make decisions about outcomes and what success looks like, whose values are being prioritized in the way we design and carry out the evaluation, and how we share power over the evaluation with those in community.

Disrupting Default Thinking

Much of the default thinking in evaluation can lead to inequitable practices, so making it visible and discussable is key to recognizing what we need to change to better align with principles of equity.

We are also unlearning some of what we've been taught about evaluation. For instance, it is generally assumed that evaluation is objective – free of bias and representing "the truth" about the world. However, every decision we make as evaluators is laden with values, beliefs and biases arising from our evaluation training, intersecting identities, experiences and so on. Part of our work is carving out time for reflection and conversation to explore and interrogate our own

thinking about:

- Who we listen to, and what information, knowledge and worldviews we consider to be inherently valuable and important.
- How we decide what is valuable and worth working on.
- What information sources we trust over others.
- How power and influence affect our interactions with partners and the community.

Centering Equity Changes Everything

Centering equity makes our evaluation practice more transparent, valid and rigorous. It enables us to better integrate multicultural validity and the complexity of perspectives that exist in communities. Even in the few years we've been practicing centering equity, we've already seen profound results:

- It's made a difference in who we partner with – seeking out evaluation partners who can push us on equity, who bring different perspectives and life experiences.
- It's changed who we hear from and how we hear them – challenging us to consistently incorporate people with lived experience into our evaluations, and prioritizing their thinking and points of views to shape our own understanding.
- It's shaped our ability to recognize the dominant narratives at play, and how that enables us to explore other ideas about how the world should look and function, including how our evaluation might look different if we started from a different way of looking at the world.
- It's helped us become better thought partners in strategy development with our Foundation colleagues. We now ask: Whose perspective is missing? What inequitable power dynamics are at play? What's the racial history of the space we're entering? What dominant worldviews are guiding our

strategic thinking?

Breaking Established Patterns Is Hard, Yet Necessary

Challenges to entrenched, systemic racism and oppressive power structures have brought us to a moment of reckoning as the COVID-19 pandemic and recent protests across the country starkly illuminate inequities. Rooting equity into our evaluation practice is critical – more critical than ever – so, we hold up the mirror to ourselves again, and ask: What are we learning? What are we unlearning? What are we challenging? What are we doing differently? What is changing?

Our team still has a long way to go, but we recognize that it's imperative to take action. With each small change, we move our practice closer to alignment with principles of equity. And as we engage in this shift, we find ourselves in excellent company. In addition to the groundbreaking work of EEI, we've seen a growing movement within the evaluation and philanthropy fields to make meaningful changes in thinking and practice.

So, we ask you to join us and to consider: What do you see in your mirror?

Related: Learn about the Colorado Collaboratory on Equitable Evaluation.

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