MEL Practice at the
David and Lucile Packard Foundation:
Evaluation in Support of
Moving from Good to Great

*An external evaluation by ORS Impact sheds light on Packard Foundation
monitoring, evaluation, and learning principles and practices in advance
of a strategic refresh*

Background

Background

In early 2017, ORS Impact was engaged to evaluate and re-examine the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) principles and practice at the David & Lucile Packard Foundation. The purpose of this evaluation was to discover what is working well, identify areas for improvement, and stimulate reflection and experimentation.

This report provides an overview of the findings from the evaluation. We see the key audience as others who wrestle with how to best support MEL in philanthropic settings so that it can support greater learning and impact, such as MEL staff working inside foundations and external evaluators working with foundations.

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Report Contents

The report is organized as follows:

1 **Background on MEL expectations and organization**

2 **Findings**
- ▸ Principles: attitudes and experience with Foundation principles
- ▸ Practice: expectations and findings related to what the Foundation is doing well and ideas for moving from good to great
  - *Monitoring*
  - *Evaluation*
  - *Learning*
- ▸ Structure and culture

3 **Takeaways**
- ▸ Our hope is that reflecting on some key findings related to the Foundation's practices, structures, and lessons learned can spark insights and ideas for others.[1]

[1] Details on data collection methods and overall strengths and limitations can be found at the end of this report. The evaluation results were shared with staff in April 2017 and used as an input to a five-year refresh for the E&L team in 2018.

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MEL Expectations and Organization

At the time of this evaluation, the Foundation had an annual budget of $290.5M and a staff of 126 (and roughly 55 Program staff). MEL practice was organized as follows:

Programs are the primary architects, owners, and users of MEL. The Foundation has a deeply-held philosophy of placing responsibility for MEL squarely within programs. Programs select their own consultants, staff the various MEL functions, and manage their own MEL budgets. Required elements of MEL practice (described in the glossary at the end of this report) included:

- Developing MEL plans and Theories of Change (ToCs) for their strategies.

- Creating an annual dashboard on strategy-level progress and learning by capturing data using a common platform (Fluxx).

- Facilitating and documenting an annual program-wide reflection (Year-in-Review meeting) on what happened and what was learned across the work of each program.

Each program has a MEL partner, an outside consultant that answers to the program and supports MEL practice. The role of MEL partners varies across programs depending on partner strengths, program needs, and staff capacity, but may include developing ToCs, developing/updating MEL plans (including outcomes and indicators), tracking and updating strategy outcomes and indicators, gathering grantee data, conducting evaluations, facilitating learning and reflection meetings, building grantee MEL capacity, and engaging the Board and Trustees.

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MEL Expectations and Organization

The Foundation's dedicated **Evaluation and Learning (E&L) team**, comprised of three staff members, provides MEL leadership, guidance, and tools across the Foundation's programs. The team's work includes:

- **Direct support to strategy teams** in their ongoing MEL and strategy development efforts, including advising on TOCs; designing MEL frameworks, surveys, and third-party evaluations; assisting with identifying evaluators; supporting the development of clear and measurable outcomes; and partnering with the Organizational Effectiveness team to provide thought leadership to programs on MEL capacity grantmaking.

- **Development of Foundation-wide tools and resources** to enable effective learning and adaptation, including managing and evolving annual progress reporting; setting common guidance for designing and planning for MEL activities; managing the Grantee Perception Report; developing and analyzing Foundation-wide surveys; and providing regular technical assistance in the use of these tools.

- **Facilitating organizational and, in particular, cross-program learning** on a variety of topics, including managing and facilitating forums about effective grantmaking practice, leading explorations on topics of cross-cutting interest, and facilitating new grantmaker orientations.

Foundation leadership engages with MEL by approving strategic plans, MEL plans, and ToCs, and by participating in annual Year-in-Review reflections.
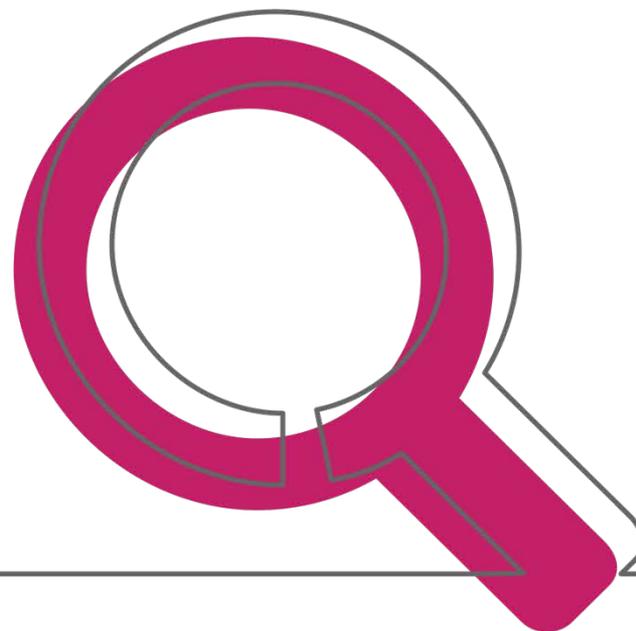
Trustees review annual reflection memos and dashboards and may engage with evaluation results.

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Findings

# About These Findings

In the following pages, we share findings related to staff attitudes and experiences, MEL practices, and organizational factors that affect the overall MEL practice at the Foundation.

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The Packard Foundation is guided by a set of five core values: integrity, respect for all people, belief in individual leadership, capacity to think big, and commitment to effectiveness. These values have led to a MEL approach that emphasizes learning and continuous improvement.

Five principles that reflect these values, formally adopted by the Board in 2014, have shaped the Foundation's MEL practice for more than a decade:
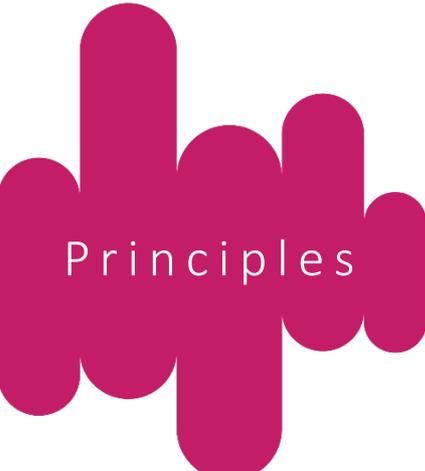
Principles

1 **Continuously learn and adapt:** Our emphasis on continuous improvement recognizes that once strategies hit the ground, they are likely to require adaptation as we learn about what works and the context changes.

2 **Learn in partnership:** We listen closely and learn in partnership with our grantees, funders, constituents, and other stakeholders.

3 **Inform our decisions with multiple inputs:** We analyze multiple sources of information and combine our learning with that of external evaluation results to inform our decision making.

4 **Cultivate curiosity:** We prioritize learning and experimentation within and across our programs, with Trustees, and with our partners in our fields.

5 **Share learning to amplify impact:** We believe that openly sharing what we're learning can generate value for our constituencies and drive impact in our fields.

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Validation of Principles

The evaluation provided an opportunity to get staff input on the relevance and value of these five principles. **Feedback from staff reaffirmed the importance of the MEL principles.**

Figure 1 | Percent of Staff that Think Practicing Each Principle is Important to Increase Impact (n=39)
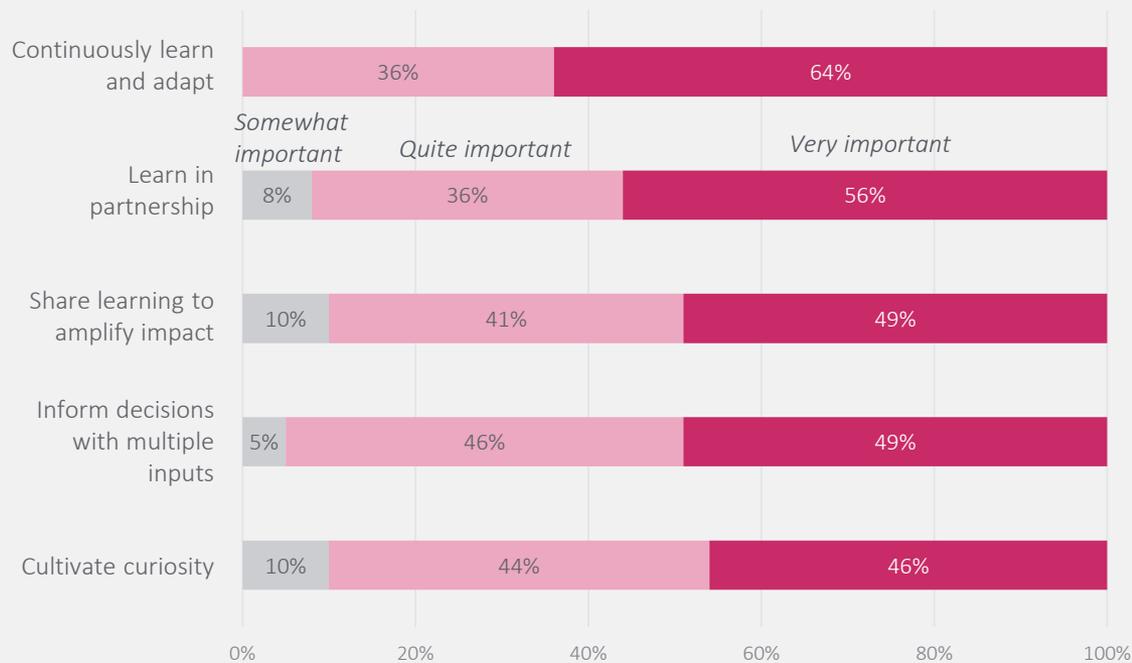
> ❝
> *I think everyone is really excited we've come at least this far. Now there's a lot more intentionality.* – Staff

> ❝
> *I think there is a big appetite for understanding how the program is working.* – Staff

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Opportunities Identified

Staff also lifted up areas of opportunity to more fully practice the MEL principles.

70% of staff think their program continuously learns and adapts quite or very faithfully

78% of staff think their program learns in partnership quite or very faithfully

55% of staff think their program informs decisions with multiple inputs quite or very faithfully

53% of staff think their program cultivates curiosity quite or very faithfully

38% of staff think their program shares learning quite or very faithfully

> *We get a lot of feedback from grantees that they would like more of those [multi-day workshops, grantee convenings], even more informal convenings, just to learn.* – Staff

> *[PO] from time to time would tell us what she was learning from other folks, in a very casual discussion format and that led me to want to learn more and be more in-depth… I always left wanting a little bit more about what was happening with the other grantees and what else they were learning and what direction they were going.* – Grantee

> *I think the Foundation can do a lot better at sharing information across programs and trying to learn in partnership with each other across program areas. Because we all believe we're special snowflakes, but in fact there are so many issues and challenges that are the same across each program.* – Staff

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Practice

We found widespread agreement that Packard Foundation's current MEL practice is **good**. At the same time, there was a hunger to see more impact and for even stronger practices, to **move from good to great**.

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MEL Practice Today

Staff generally feel good about current MEL practice.

Figure 2 | Staff Rating of MEL Practice

> " I think we're a solid B and I would put most foundations at B- or C+ or C. – Staff

> " I think we're doing it pretty darn well...I mentioned the full suite of M and E and L elements; we don't privilege one over the other. That's really smart. – Staff

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Moving MEL from Good to Great

The MEL philosophy affirms that, to be effective, strategy teams and grantee partners need quality, timely data and information to help adapt to changing conditions. In this set of findings, we reflect on strengths and opportunities for growth across MEL functions and structure.

In this section, we dig into each component of MEL:

Monitoring

Evaluation

Learning

For each component, we share:

▸ Practice expectations

▸ What the Foundation is doing well (strengths)

▸ Ideas for moving from good to great

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Monitoring Expectations

Monitoring is the ongoing collection of information about strategy implementation and the shifting strategic context. This function helps teams understand what is and is not working, and what is emerging in their respective fields.

Monitoring includes gathering intelligence from grantee reports, site visits, and conversations with grantee partners and other experts. Collecting and reporting monitoring data is the primary responsibility of program staff.

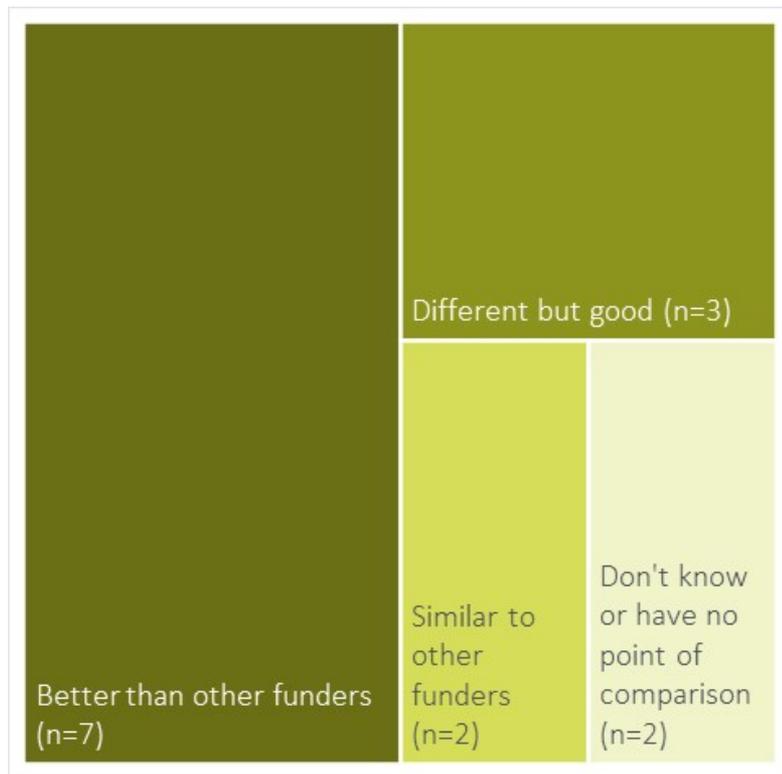Tools that support ongoing monitoring include:

- ► Fluxx, a platform for capturing and optimizing outcomes, indicators, milestones and shifts in the landscape.

- ► Strategy Dashboard Report, where selected data are exported once a year (see glossary).

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Monitoring Strengths

Grantees appreciate the Foundation's approach.

Half of grantees said they found Packard Foundation to have less demanding requirements than other funders. Grantees appreciate that staff are flexible in their requests and that quantitative indicators are balanced by narrative.

Different but good (n=3)

Better than other funders (n=7)

Similar to other funders (n=2)

Don't know or have no point of comparison (n=2)

Staff value direct touch opportunities.

Staff find value in the direct connections with grantees and other experts, both formal and informal. Monitoring data are particularly useful for formal strategy refreshes and in strategy development processes.

We have this monitoring visit twice a year … that's one of the strengths we have in terms of monitoring. – Staff

Packard is in the happy middle ground, being engaged and a resource but not being overly burdensome in their engagement, giving us the autonomy to do the work, but there as needed. – Grantee

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Monitoring: **Moving from Good to Great**

Monitoring lacks value for the time spent.

Staff report struggling to find value in the monitoring data they collect, yet survey responses suggest this is where the most time is spent.

➤ **81%** of staff find it at least somewhat challenging to incorporate monitoring data into the way programs approach their future work.

In some cases, staff with the least MEL training are responsible for monitoring, which limits their ability to structure optimal reporting plans, leading to less valuable data.

Grantee capacity limits quality of monitoring data.

➤ **91%** of staff find it at least somewhat challenging for grantees to have sufficient capacity to produce high-quality monitoring and evaluation reports.

Information flow between systems is cumbersome.

Staff report that the various MEL systems (MEL plans, Fluxx, Year in Review, and dashboards) lack alignment, contributing to lack of value for time spent. In particular, staff found that:

➤ Fluxx is challenging.

➤ Dashboards are long and at times duplicative.

➤ There is a lack of integration between MEL systems.

> *We give space for all three [components]. The fact is we spent most of our time until now... focusing on the monitoring component.* – Staff

> *The biggest hump to get over is the grantee reporting and proposals, streamlining those in relation to the monitoring framework a bit so that we can use those grantee reports in a much more useful way ... Because at the moment we don't necessarily get info that will help us.* – MEL Partner

> *Somebody manually has to take data from grantees and put it somewhere if we want to add up anything.* – Staff

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⭐ Evaluation Expectations

Evaluation is the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data for the purpose of determining the value of and decision making about a strategy, program, or policy. This function looks at what programs have set out to do, what has been accomplished, and how it was accomplished.

Evaluation often involves hiring third-party external consultants to assess the value or merit of a particular program, strategy, cluster of grants, or single grant.

Programs decide when a strategy or grant is ready for evaluation. Consistent with program ownership, evaluation practice is highly variable across programs, but is typically triggered by:

- a large investment
- plans to phase out a strategy
- an innovative strategy that is being tested

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Evaluation Strengths

Compared to the field at large, fewer staff members find it 'very challenging' to have evaluations result in meaningful insights.

65%
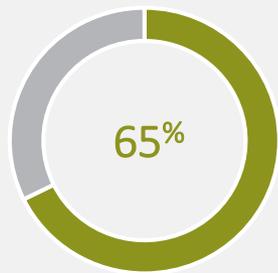
65% find it at least somewhat challenging to incorporate evaluation results into the way programs approach their future work

53%
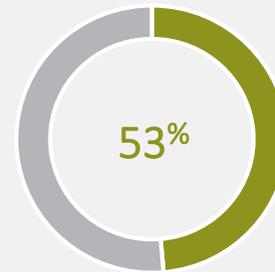
53% find it "somewhat" or "quite" challenging to allocate sufficient monetary resources for evaluation efforts

In the field at large, the comparable percentages are 70% and 63%, respectively (*Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practice* (Center for Effective Philanthropy, Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2016).

Third parties are completing high-quality evaluations. Highlights include:

- A developmental evaluation of the Starting Smart and Strong Initiative is providing actionable mid-stream data throughout the course of the initiative. Evaluation data challenged program assumptions, allowing program leaders to adapt their approach.

- A one-time evaluation of executive transition and turnover shed light on contributing factors, enabling staff to design a pilot program to help grantee organizations during a critical period of leadership transition.

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Evaluation: **Moving from Good to Great**

Evaluation commissioning is variable, but in general has been on the decline.

- ▶ A poorly articulated philosophy about what should trigger an evaluation inhibits more widespread evaluation practice relative to monitoring and research.

- ▶ Perceptions about the value of evaluation are colored by a lack of opportunity to share examples of learning that has resulted from evaluation.

- ▶ Lack of evaluation resources controlled by the E&L team limits the team's ability to incentivize evaluation both within and across programs.

A full suite of possible evaluation approaches is not being employed across the Foundation.

- ▶ Limited exposure to the possible range of available methods and approaches limits their use.

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Learning Expectations

Learning is based on data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches, including monitoring and evaluation. It is essential for strategy and decision making.

Individual learning happens continuously as staff take in information from their monitoring and evaluation efforts, as well as through research commissioned to explore new opportunities and better understand the status of fields.
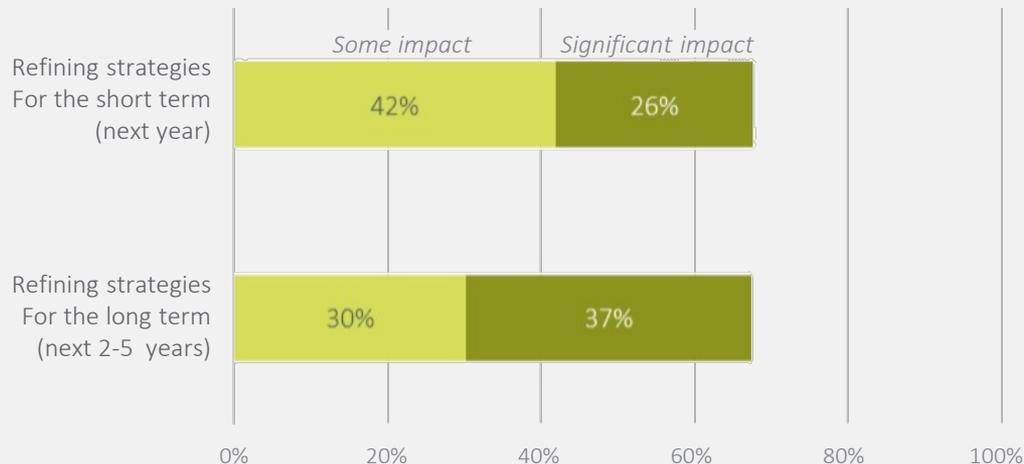
More formal institutional learning takes place in forums including annual Year-in-Review meetings, grantee meetings, and conversations with other donors and field experts.

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Learning Strengths

There is strong value for the learning and reflection that occurs through the annual Year-in-Review process, developing MEL plans, and (less consistently) developing Theories of Change. Staff report that MEL practice has some or a significant impact on both their short-term and long-term strategies.

Figure 3 | Staff Perception of the Extent to Which MEL Practice has an Impact on Their Strategy (n=43)

Some impact   *Significant impact*

Refining strategies
For the short term
(next year): 42% | 26%

Refining strategies
For the long term
(next 2-5 years): 30% | 37%

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

> *I love the Year-in-Review meetings, and I think we've gotten better at them, because you're actually questioning, discussing—people tend to be pretty open-minded during those conversations. And that's a sacred space to be reflective and to challenge your own approach that you've used and to think about what you're going to do differently.* – Staff
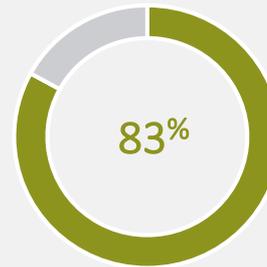
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Learning: **Moving from Good to Great**

Learning is constrained by bandwidth. Staff perceive a lot of activity that could facilitate learning, but lack the bandwidth and time to leverage the inputs into actual learning and application.
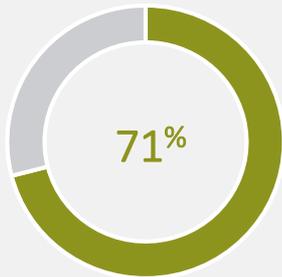
71% **71%** of staff found it at least somewhat challenging to have sufficient resources to support intentional learning

83% **83%** of staff find their program team's time limits their use of MEL work

Staff see opportunities to increase learning within programs, across the Foundation, and with grantees and colleagues in the following ways:

- ▶ **Learning questions.** Staff see a need to more consistently specify learning questions.
- ▶ **Peer learning.** This could happen through more systematic engagement of staff at various levels in learning conversations. One staff member recalled a "strategy buddy" arrangement that pairs program officers across programs to learn from one another, an idea that has some precedence in the Foundation.
- ▶ **Cross-foundation learning.** This could happen through learning forums and workshops as well as within the leadership team. Some staff suggested this should be a primary function of the E&L team given their limited capacity to serve programs in any depth.
- ▶ **Sharing learnings with grantees and the field.** This desire was expressed by both staff and grantees.
- ▶ **Real-time learning.** Staff are eager to identify ways to better support timely feedback.

99

Where we feel like we're just missing the ball is that cross-foundation [learning]. – Staff

99

[We need to spend] less time leaning into our strategy … and more time … being much more reflective and thoughtful about what we're getting from partners and trying to connect those dots and answer some big questions. – Staff

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Structure & Culture

Programs are the primary owners and users of MEL. Working within a limited set of required MEL components, programs determine how to staff the function, how much to engage with the E&L team, and the role of their external MEL partners.

In this section, we present findings related to the **program ownership model**, the **E&L team**, and the **organizational culture**.

Program Ownership Model

Program ownership has both advantages and disadvantages.

+ Program ownership of MEL:

+ Is philosophically consistent with the Foundation's commitment to hiring strong program leads and giving them the freedom to shape their programs in consultation with their grantees and others in their fields

+ Places responsibility for learning with those who are responsible for strategy development and implementation

+ Strengthens the relationships between program staff and their grantees

+ Encourages direct engagement with the executive team and Trustees around program performance

− The model results in:

– Highly variable MEL skills and practices, and a tendency to underutilize the full suite of evaluation tools available

– Inconsistent utilization of E&L team expertise, and consequently a failure to realize the full benefits of MEL

– Barriers to cross-program learning, including limited ability to commission evaluations on topics that might span multiple programs or strategies

There was such trepidation about owning it... we're now at the phase where we all want to own it. We're invested in it. – Staff

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E&L Team

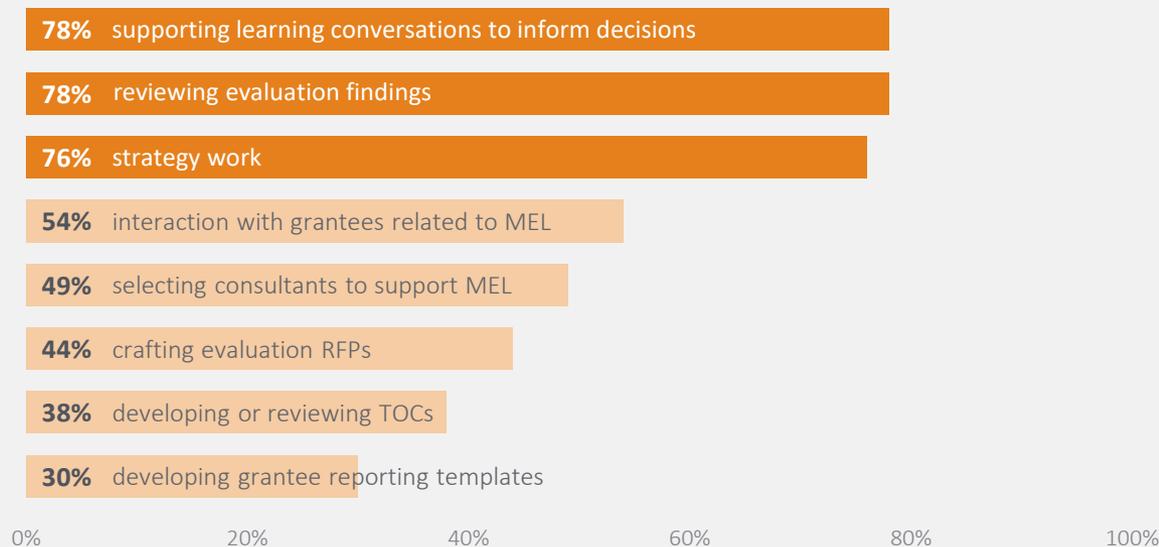## Staff find the E&L team to be very helpful and responsive.

97% of staff describe the E&L team as "responsive" or "extremely responsive" when they request support

I feel like they're always extremely generous with their time as much as they possibly can be. I feel like they're a really good resource. – Staff

Staff mostly utilize the E&L team to support learning and strategy.

Figure 4 | Percent of Staff that Engage with E&L More Than Once a Year on Various Activities (n=42)

%	Activity
78%	supporting learning conversations to inform decisions
78%	reviewing evaluation findings
76%	strategy work
54%	interaction with grantees related to MEL
49%	selecting consultants to support MEL
44%	crafting evaluation RFPs
38%	developing or reviewing TOCs
30%	developing grantee reporting templates

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

The great value that the E&L team is providing...is working with us on our strategy refresh. That's hugely valuable because they do have this view of the MEL plans across the Foundation, strategies across the Foundation, so they can really help us in a unique way to think about our own strategy. – Staff

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E&L Team

While staff find that the E&L team provides value, some aspects of the team's structure and composition may inhibit more fully realized MEL.

- Foundation staff perceive that the E&L team is **stretched thin**.

- There is a **lack of role clarity** around the various team members and when and how to best engage them.

- Staff perceive a **lack of authority and limited resources** around the E&L team and function, compared to other program services.

The thing about building demand is I've got to be able to see where the value is, and for me to see the value, I've got to experience the value.
– Staff

Evaluation and learning has a stick but not much of a carrot…the stick is useful in making people pay attention to them, but the carrot—really demonstrating value is all about having that carrot. 'You want to talk to me because I'm helpful to you. I'm going to help you do your job better, and you can have it.' – Staff

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Organizational Culture

Overall, the Foundation's organizational culture values learning and using information for improvement. However, some aspects of the culture may inhibit more fully realized MEL.

- ▶ Across all programs, staff report that the Foundation places a high value on information and learning.

- ▶ Staff are mostly "A+ students," creating a desire for perfection.

- ▶ A tendency to tailor products and processes for the benefit of senior leadership and the board can be at odds with the philosophy of program ownership and lend itself to a focus on perfecting over learning.

- ▶ Not all staff perceive that senior management encourages questions, risks, and new strategy testing.

- ▶ A sense of "hierarchy" may be limiting engagement in learning conversations by all staff who have a role in MEL practice; this was described in terms of who is included in learning conversations and who actively participates.

These factors can inhibit or dampen the potential for effective learning in service of greater impact.

> *There is something about them that still feels in some ways letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. Overcomplicating. Thinking that it needs to be more formal rather than less gets in the way of being a more "natural" process. — MEL Partner*

> *I don't know where the tentativeness comes from … For learning, I think that it can definitely be an impediment. — Staff*

> *If the expectation is you're going to perform really well … you have to build the trust first so that someone can go up there and fail. — Staff*

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Takeaways

About the Takeaways

The following takeaways do not suggest a departure from the existing model in which programs are the primary MEL owners. Rather, they suggest some fruitful areas for future refinement.

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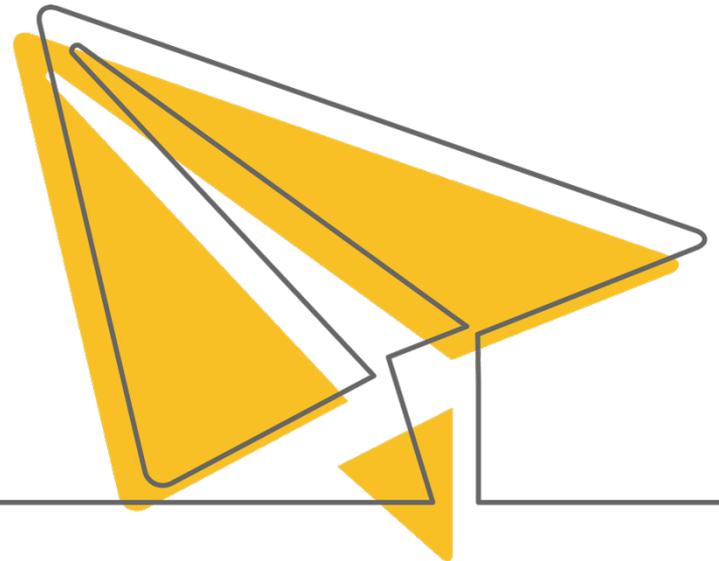
Strong Foundation

Current MEL practice is good, providing a strong foundation

> Staff **value** the principles, structure and ownership of the MEL function, and the quality of E&L team support

> Most staff report that MEL practice has some or a significant **impact** on their strategies

> Grantees appreciate the **flexible** approach taken by the Packard Foundation

> MEL partners view the foundation as **ahead of its peers** in having a defined and elaborated MEL practice

> Ideas for improvement are perceived as **fine tuning**

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Paradoxes at Play

To move from good to great, fine tuning MEL practice may require attention to organizational culture and support for learning that are modeled at the highest levels of the Foundation.

There is some perceived disconnect between core values and leadership modeling

69% of staff feel there is the appropriate amount of engagement from senior management in **communicating to staff** the use of evaluation and evaluative information

44% of staff feel there is the appropriate amount of engagement from senior management in **modeling** the use of information from MEL efforts

MEL practice for programs or for leadership?

While leadership clearly states that MEL should be for programs, paradoxically there is a strong emphasis on tailoring products for the benefit of senior leadership and the board.

Which audience gets the most attention? Is the balance right?

Focus on "performing" or learning?

While staff feel that they are good learners and care about learning, they recognize the disconnect when they devote so much time to perfecting products for leadership. The result is often a focus on perfecting over learning.

Which purpose gets the lion's share of staff energy? Is the balance right?

32

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Ideas for Fine Tuning

There are opportunities to improve within the current model

Ideas from staff on how to build on the model's history and strengths to continue to improve included:

▸ **Build better connections between components** of MEL processes and systems, such as the flow of information between strategy dashboards, grantee reporting, MEL plans, and Year in Review content.

▸ **Build capacity among staff** for quality MEL practice.

▸ **Build capacity among grantees** for quality MEL practice.

▸ **Improve opportunities for systematic learning and reflection,** as suggested on slide 23.

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Conclusion

The evaluation function in philanthropy – with staff assigned to evaluation-related responsibilities – can be traced back to the 1970s. As the function matures across the field, foundations are increasingly turning their evaluative lens on themselves to learn what they are doing well and what they might do better. The questions being asked are about how the function is organized and staffed as well as how investments are supporting mission.

While the Packard Foundation originally embarked on this process to inform and refine their own ongoing practice, we hope that sharing the approach, strengths, and opportunities for growth can help the field more broadly continue to strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes so that the time and resources spent add value to the work and contribute to foundation missions.

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Acknowledgments

This evaluation could not have been completed without the engagement of the entire staff of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and in particular the support and commitment of Meredith Blair Pearlman and her entire **Evaluation and Learning team**. The commitment to sharing what is learned with the field is the motivation for sharing these evaluation results.

The ORS Impact team, led by Sarah Stachowiak and supported by Carlyn Orians, Jenn Beyers, Melissa Howlett, and Anne Nsimbi, is grateful for the opportunity to delve deeply into the Foundation's experience with monitoring, evaluation, and learning practice and to bring our evaluative lens to help them move from good to great. We hope the field can learn from the experience of one foundation's journey.

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Evaluation Methods

Findings are synthesized from a variety of data sources:

Staff Survey

48 of 66 responded (73% response rate); survey of a sample of program staff was administered in March 2017

Interviews

46 total, including 23 staff members (a sample representing distinct roles and program areas), 14 grantees, and 9 MEL partners; interviews were conducted in person and by phone in March and April 2017

Program Document Review

Review of existing MEL plans and Theories of Change, as well as the 2016 GPR report

External Document Review

Review of *M&E Landscape* (Monitor Institute, 2015) and *Benchmarking Foundation Evaluation Practice* (Center for Effective Philanthropy, Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2016)

Staff Engagement Exercise

Brainstorming session on preliminary findings using oblique strategy cards conducted in April 2017

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Evaluation Methods

Observations on our methods:

⋯▶ A strength of our methods was **broad representation of staff** in both the survey and interviews.

⋯▶ The grantee sample was selected randomly to represent all five programs, but the **small sample size** (n=14) limits conclusions about the grantee experience.

⋯▶ The survey included items comparable to existing Field Benchmarking Data, but the **comparison is imperfect** as the benchmarking survey only included the point of view of evaluation staff across foundations.

Observation on our findings:

⋯▶ **Programs vary.** This report focuses on themes that are generally true across the Foundation.

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Glossary

Definition of terms used:

Fluxx MEL tool

Platform for capturing and optimizing strategy-related data (e.g., outcomes/indicators, milestones, and shifts in landscape) in order to support adaptive management of strategies.

MEL plan

A design for strategies related to MEL activities in support of learning and improvement. Includes evaluation and learning priorities, monitoring needs and outcomes/indicators, and implementation plan.

Strategy Dashboard Report

Annual report on strategy-level progress and learning. Data is captured in the Fluxx MEL tool and then exported into a PDF report and included in program-level reporting to Trustees in the first quarter.

Year-In-Review

Annual program-wide reflection on what occurred and what was learned across the work of each program. Captured in internal report. Also used as input to program-level reporting to Trustees in the first quarter.

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Missions Accomplished