GUIDING QUESTIONS TO ADVANCE EQUITY IN EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

A PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE, CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND RIGOROUS METHODS

CONTENTS

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVANCING EQUITY IN EVALUATION AND RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of researchers, evaluators and funders have sought to expand their knowledge and develop stronger findings by using methods and evaluation and research partners that advance equity. They have drawn from the efforts of researchers and evaluators who have documented the benefits of more equitable practices for decades.[1]

But for funders, translating the important principles of equity in evaluation and research into day-to-day practice can be daunting. Where to start? What does it mean to ensure that evaluation and research advance equity?

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's mission is to build a brighter future for children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. Recognizing that data show[2] children and families of color often face the greatest barriers to success, Casey advances racial equity across its work. In 2017, the Foundation's Research and Evaluation team began to develop a systematic approach to funding and working with others to make equity a focus in its evaluation and research. To put these principles into practice, the Research and Evaluation team developed a set of flexible, adaptable guiding questions to foster a common approach for conducting equity-centered research and evaluation with partners. These questions helped Casey staff turn the Foundation's commitment to equity in evaluation and research[3] into actionable steps to negotiate what can feel like a large, overwhelming process.

This resource is designed to share the guiding questions with other researchers, evaluators and funders interested in conducting studies that use equitable practices and respond to the cultural backgrounds of communities. Along with the guiding questions, this overview document shares context about the Foundation's approach to evaluation and research, insights into how the Foundation incorporated these practices into its work and ideas for how others can use this approach.

To learn more about the team's journey to incorporate these questions and read examples of how they were used in projects, see the article "A Team's Journey Toward More Equitable Philanthropic Research and Evaluation Practices" in *The Foundation Review*.[4]

These guiding questions spring from two key influences: the Equitable Evaluation Framework[5] and the Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide*.[6] At their heart, both the guiding questions in this document and the seven steps to advancing equity described in Casey's 2015 guide stress the importance of being aware of racial and cultural contexts and seeking solutions that reflect collective wisdom. Developing those solutions starts with promoting understanding among all people involved, emphasizing trust and open communication, and involving those most affected in gathering and analyzing data to find the root causes of inequality and figure out the best solutions. In particular, the questions in this guide align with Step 6 of the Foundation's steps to equity.[7] This step provides a structured process for considering who is (or is likely to be) most affected by a project, a practice or a policy; ensuring they are fully engaged in the identification of possible challenges and possibilities; and engaging them in informing any needed changes.

The questions were developed in a multiyear process that included consultation with the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, staff retreats, a retrospective look at where Casey already was engaged in evaluation and research to advance equity, meetings to edit document drafts, pilot projects to test the questions and efforts to familiarize new staff with how to use them.

KEY ACTIONS TO INCORPORATING EQUITY INTO STUDIES: WHAT FOUNDATIONS SHOULD KNOW

Within the Research, Evaluation, Evidence and Data unit, Casey's Research and Evaluation team works closely with Foundation program colleagues and nonprofit or agency partners to identify evaluation and research opportunities and collaborates with third-party evaluation and research teams to carry out those studies. The team's investments cover a variety of methods and approaches, including qualitative case studies, evaluations of efforts to reform systems and quantitative assessments of program outcomes. The guiding questions are designed to reflect the diversity of these approaches.

With the questions as a guide, Casey staff and project teams can examine biases in a nonthreatening way and do their work better by gathering information and prompting reflection. In developing its approach and guiding questions, Casey's Research and Evaluation team identified five key actions that may help other foundations embed equity-focused practices in their research and evaluation work.

Questions to Ask About Purpose and Values

1. Why is the team doing this in the first place?

2. What is the team trying to accomplish?

3. How could this process fit with the ways that the team engages in learning?

4. How might the values that the team holds show up in this work?

1   SET ASIDE THE TIME AND SPACE FOR THIS PROCESS.

- **Provide a flexible amount of time to develop practices and approaches.**
  The Casey team did not give themselves a deadline for figuring out how to implement equity-centered practices because they felt strongly that this important work should not be rushed. The team also assumed that the work would continue and be adapted as knowledge and conditions evolved. That is, they did not envision a time when the work would be completed.

- **Schedule retreats to help team members focus on shifting practice.**
  Dedicated retreats and brown-bag sessions gave team members time to delve deeply into what it means to fund research and evaluation projects that advance equity, to see how their values connected with approaches and to expand their thinking beyond traditional evaluation and research methods.

- **Focus on values and principles early in the process. Clarify why you are doing this work.**
  Having a vision based on values helped get the team excited before they dove into the details of the work — and equipped individual team members to make the case to colleagues and partners. For example, the Casey team identified human dignity, equity, belonging, taking risks and transparency as shared values.

2   START WITH HOW THE TEAM ALREADY USES PRACTICES TO INCORPORATE EQUITY. BUILD ON WHAT WORKS IN THOSE APPROACHES.

Starting with what Casey was already doing to incorporate methods that advance equity made a potentially overwhelming shift feel doable. This approach also gave the Casey team practical examples that they could build on.

Questions to Ask About Advancing Equity Within Your Team

1. What roles can each person on our team play in embedding evaluation and research methods that advance equity in our organization?

2. What guiding questions make sense for us to use? Which don't?

3. What do we need to adjust or add to make this resource useful for our organization?

3   WORK WITHIN YOUR TEAM FIRST AND GIVE SIGNIFICANT ROLES TO ALL TEAM MEMBERS.

▪ **Do this work in-house.**
Although the Equitable Evaluation Initiative provided crucial leadership in the Casey team's journey to establish the right approach, Casey team members played significant and specific roles throughout the process. That choice ensured that the entire team contributed to and collaborated in developing the guiding questions.

▪ **Customize the guiding questions to your organization's situation and needs.**
By customizing this approach, the Casey team made sure it fit their needs. They thought about it not as a rigid checklist but as a series of questions to identify blind spots. The questions helped the team think more deeply, iteratively and concretely about how to advance equity than staff had done in the past.

4   CARRY OUT LOW-STAKES PILOT PROJECTS TO TEST IDEAS.

▪ **Test the questions in small, six-month pilot projects.**
Pilot projects allowed the Casey team to quickly test their process and gain valuable insights — for example, what they might do differently to engage community and youth leaders. As they worked on specific projects, team members deepened their relationships with evaluation and research partners. Casey staff found that the pilot projects not only helped expand their own practices to advance equity, but also helped their partners think about their work in new ways.

When working with evaluation and research partners, the team learned that using the tool to ask specific questions of their partners and prompt joint reflection was more productive than directly sharing the entire resource.

▪ **Introduce the approach with partners and vendors who are open to reflection and working in new ways.**
Because not all partners are in the same place in their equity work, it made sense to first work with study teams and partners who had proven they were open to new ideas and ways of approaching research and evaluation.

Questions to Ask About Pilot Projects

1. What do we want to learn from pilots specifically?

2. What are some projects that are either ending or starting that might be good candidates for a pilot?

3. How will we document what we learn to build institutional knowledge?

5   **BRING IN COMMUNICATIONS COLLEAGUES TO HELP MAKE THE CASE.**

▪ **Ask a communications colleague for help in explaining your approach to staff members at your organization.**
The Casey team found that engaging a communications colleague forced them to clearly explain what they meant by incorporating equity in research and evaluation, which helped them articulate the benefits of this approach.

▪ **Create short documents and talking points to communicate how incorporating equity principles into research and evaluation can lead to greater rigor and more significant findings.**
For Casey team members, these documents were a central part of conversations with Foundation leadership about the resources and time they would need to build into grants and contracts for research and evaluation that advanced equity. For example, community members serving on advisory boards need to be equitably compensated. These boards need more feedback from researchers to ensure a study provides useful information to the community, which will require more time for the work.

> **Questions to Ask in Communicating the Value of Equitable Evaluation**
>
> 1. What difference does this approach make in our understanding about the impact of our investments?
> 2. What are the benefits of this approach and how can we explain them in plain language?
> 3. What do leaders need to know about the resources required for this approach?

RESOURCES FOR DEFINITIONS AND LEARNING MORE

The research and evaluation field is increasingly focusing on ensuring that projects incorporate equity principles and practices. These resources offer definitions, practical advice and strategies for integrating equity into research and evaluation work:

1. *Doing Evaluation in Service of Racial Equity[8]:* This collection from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation offers guidance on how to ensure evaluation efforts support racial equity.

2. *A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective Throughout the Research Process[9]:* Child Trends lays out a step-by-step approach for including a focus on racial and ethnic equity in research.

3. *The Eval Matrix[10]:* This tool helps users apply equitable evaluation principles in their projects, ensuring that equity is a central consideration.

4. *Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CREE) Learning Series[11]:* Change Matrix offers a series focused on culturally responsive and equitable evaluation, providing resources and training to help evaluators respect and reflect cultural diversity in their work.

5. *Equitable Evaluation Initiative's Resources[12]:* Equitable Evaluation Initiative provides a variety of tools and resources aimed at changing how evaluation is typically done, encouraging a shift toward methods that prioritize fairness and equity.

HOW TO USE GUIDING QUESTIONS

ABOUT THE GUIDING QUESTIONS

The questions are designed to:

- Cover each stage of a research or evaluation project.
  - Conceiving the project.
  - Choosing a project team.
  - Making a study plan.
  - Determining methodology and data collection.
  - Analyzing data.
  - Sharing findings.
- Be used at any stage of study process.
- Ensure community ownership.
- Provide opportunities to reflect on ways to advance equity in projects.
- Include a series of repeating prompts to help users think about what the project looks like now and what it could look like.

Acknowledging that there's no single way to incorporate equity principles into a study, the questions encourage consideration of the project's specific context and feasible approaches. Users should not expect to go through these questions in a set order or feel the need to check off every item. Often, using the questions prompted the team to think about how earlier actions will affect the ability to use equitable practices later. As you choose to dive into specific questions, it is helpful to consider how the phases are interdependent.

PREPARING TO USE THE QUESTIONS

Before your team begins using the questions, consider:

- who should be involved in answering the questions;
- how your group is defining community and stakeholders;
- how your group might need to think about translating the questions for others; and
- based on where you are in the work, what would be most helpful for your group.

ADDRESSING PHASES OF A STUDY

Questions are organized in phases to cover all aspects of a study:

Cross-Cutting
Addresses overall engagement of community members and others with a stake in the project, as well as practices and resources that support key equity principles. These questions are relevant for all phases.

Teaming
Addresses diversity in the selection of the team that will conduct the study and expectations for incorporating equity principles in proposals and in who should be included on the team.

Study Plan
Covers development of research questions and plans for conducting the study, including ways the study will address systemic drivers of inequity and incorporate community assets.

Methods and Data Collection
Considers validity, rigor, culturally appropriate methods, data collection and input from community members and other stakeholders.

Analysis
Facilitates examination of racial and ethnic disparities, assets and systemic drivers of inequity. Guides teams in interpreting findings with partners.
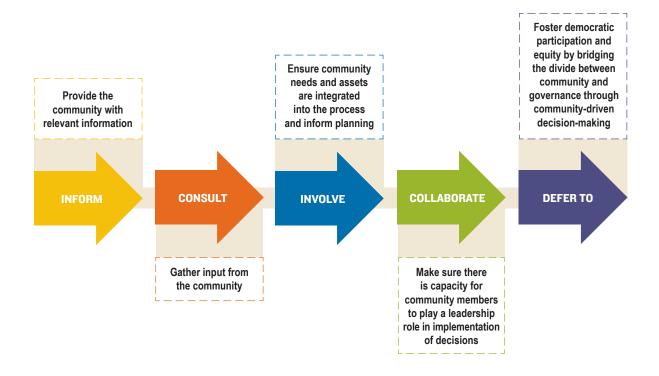
Share and Use
Helps teams determine roles and input in dissemination of findings. Guides consideration of how community members and others with a stake in the project will access findings and judge their relevance and benefits.

For some funders, answering the entire set of questions may be helpful. But for many, perusing the questions may be more useful, enabling funders to test the approach and see how it might fit into their work.

ABOUT THE RATING SYSTEM

Each question provides a rating system to help users gauge where they are. Most questions provide a scale of answers from "Not at All" to "Definitely." But for questions that begin with the word "How," users are asked to rate the extent to which they work with others along a continuum from less involvement to more. The graphic on the following page provides definitions for each option on this continuum.

INFORM → CONSULT → INVOLVE → COLLABORATE → DEFER TO

INFORM: Provide the community with relevant information

CONSULT: Gather input from the community

INVOLVE: Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into the process and inform planning

COLLABORATE: Make sure there is capacity for community members to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions

DEFER TO: Foster democratic participation and equity by bridging the divide between community and governance through community-driven decision-making

EXAMPLES OF HOW YOU MIGHT USE THESE QUESTIONS

▪ **To identify who will be part of the study team:** Review the Teaming section to consider the knowledge and experience needed for an inclusive team with the capacity to design and conduct a culturally responsive study.

▪ **To help the team examine how their assumptions and biases affect their decision-making:** Look at the Cross-Cutting section to plan for the processes and expectations for the team to reflect on their practices.

▪ **To consider how the study will respond to the priorities of the community most affected by the study:** Reflect on how various phases are shaped by community perspectives by selecting questions in the Study Plan section; the Methods and Data Collection section; and the Share and Use section.

▪ **To design a study that can help you and others understand differences in the experiences and outcomes for various racial groups, with attention to how their identities and experiences intersect:** Use questions in the Study Plan section and the Analysis section to develop and implement an approach that asks the right questions and provides the data needed to address these differences.

▪ **To ensure that the study will consider how systems and structures create or maintain racial inequities:** Review the Study Plan section, the Methods and Data Collection section and the Analysis section to identify the questions that the study team could examine and the data needed to provide the appropriate context.

▪ **To help include processes for community members to interpret and use the findings from the study:** Select questions in the Analysis section and the Share and Use section to ensure community members offer their insights and to provide accessible mechanisms for sharing data and findings.

At Casey, these questions helped the team apply the principles of advancing equity to the Foundation's daily decisions about the studies it commissions and oversees. Every user's experience will be different. Feel free to adjust, add or delete questions to make this resource relevant to your needs.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR EACH STAGE OF A STUDY

PREPARING TO USE THE QUESTIONS

This page provides links to each guiding question by stage. **Access the sets of questions by clicking on their category name** and scroll through to find the questions you plan to use. Feel free to use the questions that apply to you in any order, and to only use the questions that are relevant to you.

Before your team begins using the questions, consider:

- **who should be involved in answering the questions;**
- **how your group is defining community and stakeholders;**
- **how your group might need to think about translating the questions for others; and**
- **based on where you are in the work, what would be most helpful for your group.**

Cross-Cutting Guiding Questions

ESTABLISHING EQUITABLE PRACTICES FOR THE PROJECT

- Community engagement in design
- Advisory committee representation
- Training and compensation for those who participate
- Recognition of different kinds of expertise
- How the project team and funder work together
- Establishing trust
- Team self-reflection

Teaming Guiding Questions

STUDY TEAM DIVERSITY

- Study team selection process
- Community members and stakeholders involvement in the selection of the study team
- Study team selection process documents
- Questions to be considered together about team diversity

Study Plan Guiding Questions

INCLUSIVE APPROACH

- Community engagement in planning
- Community engagement in question development
- Identification of community priorities

PLANNING FOR ANALYSIS OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES; STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMS-LEVEL DRIVERS OF INEQUITY; AND INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SYSTEMS-LEVEL ASSETS

- Incorporation of issues related to inequity
- Incorporation of context and drivers of inequity
- Demographic data collection
- Time horizon to measure systems change

Methods and Data Collection Guiding Questions

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE METHODS

- Method relevance
- Assessment of rigor
- Examination of community and system strengths
- Protocol development
- Community involvement in data collection

Analysis Guiding Questions

ANALYSIS OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES; STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMS-LEVEL DRIVERS OF INEQUITY; AND INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SYSTEMS-LEVEL ASSETS

- Data analysis by race and ethnicity
- Data analysis by other important categories
- Analysis of intersecting factors
- Analysis of context, systems and structures
- Processes for interpreting results together
- Processes for exploring implications
- Processes for analyzing data together

Share and Use Guiding Questions

DISSEMINATION PLANNING

- Community engagement in plans to share findings
- Feedback loops for sharing and implementing findings
- Community role in sharing findings

RELEVANCE AND UTILITY OF FINDINGS

- Access to data
- Access to findings
- Ability of community to act on findings
- How identified actions benefit those affected
- How community will use and benefit from findings

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS AND PRODUCTS

- Accessible design of products
- Accessible platforms for final products

ENDNOTES

1 Hood, S. (2001). Nobody knows my name: In praise of African American evaluators who were responsive. *New Directions for Evaluation, 2001*(92), 31-44. And, Bledsoe, K., Gonzales, F., & Guillen-Woods, B. (2022). *The Eval Matrix*©. Strategy Learning Partners for Innovation. Retrieved from https://slp4i.com/the-eval-matrix/philosophies-and-approaches

2 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024) *2024 Race for Results: Building a pathway to opportunity for all children*. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/resources/2024-race-for-results

3 For simplicity, evaluation and research will largely be referred to as a study for the rest of the document.

4 Spring, K. A., Fernanda Mata, M., Poirier, J., Holmes, A., & François, A. (2023). A team's journey toward more equitable philanthropic research and evaluation practices. *The Foundation Review, 15*(3). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1667

5 Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (n.d.). *Equitable evaluation framework.* Retrieved February 16, 2024, from www.equitableeval.org/framework

6 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015). *Race equity and inclusion action guide*. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide

7 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015).

8 W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2021). *Doing evaluation in service of racial equity.* Every Child Thrives. Retrieved March 7, 2024, from https://everychildthrives.com/doing-evaluation-in-service-of-racial-equity

9 Child Trends. (2019). *A guide to incorporating a racial and ethnic equity perspective throughout the research process.* Retrieved March 7, 2024, www.childtrends.org/publications/a-guide-to-incorporating-a-racial-and-ethnic-equity-perspective-throughout-the-research-process

10 Bledsoe, K., Gonzales, F., & Guillen-Woods, B. (2022).

11 Expanding The Bench. (2023). *Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CREE) learning series.* Retrieved from https://expandingthebench.org/CREE-Learning-Series

12 Equitable Evaluation Initiative. (n.d.). *Resources.* Retrieved March 7, 2024, from www.equitableeval.org/resources

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION