INTRODUCTIONS: SCENE TEAM

Emily Gates: [00:00:00] I'm Emily Gates. I'm an assistant professor at Boston College, one of the co-

These are all on the website, so they are there for your perusing. Thanks. With that, I'll turn it over to Andres to kick off the panel.

PANEL INTRODUCTION & Q: IDEAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUNDERS & EVALUATORS

Andres Castro Samayoa: [00:04:32] Hi, everyone. My name is Andres Castro Samayoa and I'm an assistant professor at Boston College in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education. I'm going to stop doing a shared screen right now so that folks can see each other a little bit better. And my invitation will be for those of you who are in the audience to turn off your video so that then our panelists can come to the foreground and be the first squares that everyone is able to see. So as we're doing that, I'll just quickly start introducing our panel as well. We're going to be hearing from all of them for the next hour. We have a few questions that are really trying to get at the heart of today's conversation, which is how is it that we can imagine co-creating contractual and organizational support for equity in the context of relationship building between commissioners and evaluators? We're joined today by Drew Koleros, who is a senior researcher at Mathematica. Drew, if you want to wave and say hello. Dr. Monique Liston, who's a chief strategist and joyful militant at Ubuntu, Min Ma who's the founder and principal at MXM Research Group. Rory Neuner, who's the learning officer at the Barr Foundation, and Robert Torres with the Boston Region and director of Community Benefits at Beth Israel. So in advance of today's gathering, I had reached out to all of our panelists with a few questions. **The first one, which was sort of helping us to get things started on a pretty broad level, just imagining how is it that we get to envision the ideal relationship between funders and evaluators, and how is it that each of these groups can actually try to strive and cultivate that relationship?** So Rory, why don't we get started with you?

Rory Neuner: [00:06:15] Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. It's exciting to be part of this conversation. So I would just say I work for a foundation, a funder, the Barr Foundation, based in Boston, where I've been for about the last year and a half. But some of the comments that I'll make today are also informed by both my own work as a former consultant, both as an individual consultant and evaluation consultant, as well as part of a larger firm. And prior to coming to Barr, I worked at another funder in Michigan, where some of the work I'll talk about today. I think the ideal relationship if we kind of go

requirements are important, but sometimes we have to push back, especially if we're putting too much burden on the grantee and creating some issues there, especially in the light of COVID, where we started and negotiated this contract even before I started or some of the contracts before I started. So I've had to deal with the cards that I've been dealt and had to really work to build relationships with the evaluators that I'm working with. And hopefully, they understand the constraints that I'm under as well as the aspirations that we have and try to manage those aspirations up and push against some of those requirements at times.

Min Ma: [00:10:55] Hi, everyone. It's great to be here with you all today in a different capacity than usual. I lead a small evaluation practice called MXM Research Group. We're currently a team of six. I'm bringing to this conversation the lens of being a small business owner and lead evaluator on a number of projects of different sizes. Previously, I was an independent consultant and subcontracted often, and I am also, in reflecting on my comments for today. I am also drawing from my experience having been a program officer for an international NGO and also as the President of GBEN, we've done a lot of thinking lately about what our role is in building an evaluation pipeline or pipeline of evaluators that really reflects the communities we're trying to serve. And so I'm drawing from a lot of these conversations that I'm having all the time. I want to echo the comments already about trust and how important a role that plays and just having conversation early on in the relationship to align on values, on the ways we're going to be working together, acknowledging those power dynamics and constraints that Robert's describing, trying to decide whose perspectives we're going to prioritize, and in defining the evaluation questions and the criteria and being transparent about what biases we bring, because everyone brings a bias and there's no way for any team to fully account for that. So just to be transparent about that.

Monique Liston: [00:12:47] Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Monique Liston. I'm the founder and chief strategist at Ua.kr aors 12 Tf1 our role is in buia b5-5( )7(j)-6(u)-6(u)1me is Mofte

it's not to put ourselves in the position where we have to mute something that is very, very apparent about us so that we are thinking consciously and intentionally about how race shows up in our everyday lives and connected to that, echoing this idea of trust, I'm thinking about radical vulnerability and radical honesty and being in a position to actually be honest about the questions people have concerning the evaluation, context or frame, especially when we're in this time where everybody has questions about racial equity, but not enough people have the language that are prepared to engage with questions about race. And so it's like, we want to know what's happening about racial equity with X organization and X grantees strategy. And then I ask them like, Are you prepared to address how you show up as a white person in this space? And people are like, oh my gosh, did you just say I was white? I mean, you look white. Can we get ready to have a conversation about that? And if we're not prepared to have a conversation about that, it's going to be really difficult for us to have a meaningful conversation about your equity strategy and overall our evaluative thinking around it. So building that relationship around what does it mean to be radically honest? Like are you asking t

conversations that many are privy to or excluded from. We also partner with a lot of smaller evaluation firms, so we play an interesting anchoring position in some of these ecosystems, and that's kind of some of the perspective that I want to talk to talk about today as part of this panel. So I was going to say trust, but everybody else stole my answer. So maybe I'll talk a little bit about why I think trust is so important, particularly in evaluation contracts. I think in general between funders and organizations that they're working within this grant or contractual relationship trust is key, obviously, as everybody's been talking about. But I think evaluators have a particularly important role here because sometimes we're the honest broker of hard conversations between funders and their grantees. Sometimes the power dynamics don't allow funded partners or other organizations to say what they really want to say and we can be their mouthpiece. We can help to amplify voices that might not be able to be amplified otherwise. And building that relationship where we can provide that to a foundation client, for instance, in a way that they can actually receive it in the right way and then act on it is really important. So I think especially in evaluation relationships, building that trust and relationship early on creates the conditions for us to sometimes have those hard conversations that they need to hear. As Dr. Monique was just talking about. Thanks, everybody. Nice to be here with you.

Q: BARRIERS & STRATEGIES TO EQUITABLE EVALUATION

Andres Castro Samayoa: [00:17:56] Thanks all for getting us started with this very clear idea of the importance of trust as a cornerstone of effective relationships, of striving for radical honesty in the way that we enter these conversations. The follow up, I think, to this is to then say we have this sense of what we're aspiring to. Let's consider all the things that might be getting in the way as the barriers to really try to cultivate these meaningful and deeper relationships. **So I'm curious to hear from all of you as well in terms of what are some of the specific things that are getting in the way? What are some of those common barriers? And then how have you been working to try to chip away at them? How is it that you're navigating strategies to try to address those barriers?** Min, I wonder if we could get started with you.

Min Ma: [00:18:45] So to start funders and their partners, grantees, etc. have limited time to devote to evaluation. They're doing so many things, they're implementing programs, they're building community engagement. And so one barrier that comes to

mind is the amount of time it takes to have these conversations and to be thoughtful. Even before your partnering together officially in the proposal process as you're kicking off a project, how do we create time for this and make it really count? And so when I think about what has worked really well, I have appreciated the RFPs that my team looks at that a lot of them this year have included an invitation to ask questions or to chat prior to even submitting. And I'm curious kind of how that looks and feels on the funder's side because I know that takes a lot of time, but those early conversations are really critical in better understanding how much time and willingness there is to spend on that and then allowing a scope of work to come out of that. That really works for our team and works for the folks that we're partnering with. I think it's really useful to spell out explicitly what the expectations are of our partners whether that's the people funding us or commissioning the work, or it's the grantees or the program participants. And then to have that all on the table, to be able to check our assumptions and make sure it's going to work and make sense, I'll stop there.

Drew Koleros: [00:20:50] A lot of my work is around systems thinking and systems change and complexity. And I think that when you brought up this question around the barriers, I think one of the main barriers is that when we enter into these relationships thinking it's a simple situation or a simple problem and not embracing the complexity of the situation we're in so simple situations where it's predictable and you know what to do lends itself to plan and control fixed contracts, fixed work plans, defined budgets, clear milestones, and deliverables get the work happening really fast. And at the last workshop we had, one of the pre-reads was around the characteristics of white supremacy and a lot of those characteristics really resonated with me around fast and urgent timelines, perfectionism, the sense of urgency, a need for written word, things written down and memos and written down and work plans and all of these different things. Whereas when we think about entering into more complex situations, we're thinking a little bit more about embracing that uncertainty that we're not really sure how this is going to go. It needs to be a bit flexible. So working to establish the bounds or the parameters of the boundaries of the work that we're doing early on with our partners, I think is really, really critical. So taking space to get to know each other, building those relationships, realizing that it's uncertain and we're not quite sure how to get there, but we'll keep open communication together. And allow a little bit of trust on both sides to start to experiment and probe and sense and figure out where to go from there. The other part of the analogy around complex systems is that I think a lot of this work is

bringing foundations, and I'd be keen to hear Rory thoughts on this as well, bringing foundations along to this journey to understand that they're also an actor within this ecosystem, that simply by giving money out to funded partners or engaging in this, you're not external to the system and just dropping some cash in there. You're now an

Monique Liston: [00:26:08] I just want to clap again and again. Just reiterating for everyone, like foundations are a mess and it's exhausting for everyone who is trying to do any sort of evaluative thinking, whether you're in them or outside of them. Like it's just a mess. So just yay for doing good work and keeping me employed, but also a mess at the same time. But what I think one of the common barriers just to say something different than all the other brilliance that's on the panel is that even I get fooled sometimes to think that like people are prepared to engage a Black woman. And I think a common barrier, the truth is people aren't they don't want to, and they want to hire a firm like ours because it's cool, it's hip, it's sexy. Especially since 2020 with the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. We're the hottest thing on the market because we're a bunch of black faces. And then when we come in with a framework that's questioning anti-Blackness and white supremacy, it's like, hold on now. We just came here to give you some money and for y'all to cosign what we're already doing. And that creates a lot of tension. And so I think about the initial barrier is us not recognizing that the internalized ways in which white supremacy culture works in our most well-meaning and social justice, forward fields is often present and insidious and creating a lot of trouble even when we want to act like it's not because they give money to the right organizations. And I think that barrier of acting like it doesn't exist is what causes a lot of trouble. But it catches me off guard sometimes because I'm assuming like, hey, you saw my website, you see what I can do? You heard me right, you hear me speak now you're ready to engage. And it's like, Hold on. No, we hired you to be cute. We hired you to cosign. We hired you to not take your job that seriously. And that is a large barrier in terms of like creating the ideal working relationship for how we have addressed this. And I will stand by this until I'm no longer able to hold this position. But so often evaluators are put in this position to like go along with it because this is how you get paid. And I remain of the position of like, we're going to tell the truth. So if this isn't working, we're going to say it. And we as evaluators kind of speaking to what Drew was saying earlier, we're going to stand there and say like, this is not working based on what

like just because we're asking questions like Rory was saying, just because we're curious or just we're pointing out that white supremacy culture is a part of all of our lives and we need to address it somehow. Doesn't mean you're bad. It doesn't mean you're bad. And so we need to get off of that good, bad, racist, not racist sort of paradigm that shapes our organizations and therefore the work that comes out of organizations and get into how are we actually improving the community, addressing equity, making sure that this challenge is overcome and get rid of that notion of like, I'm good or bad, I'm right, I'm wrong, I'm racist, I'm not racist. It's we're all learning and we have to get into a space that we learn together.

Robert Torres: [00:29:57] Yes. And certainly echo, what everyone has already said, I think for me just being super micro about the work that I do. So much of our giving was directive as a legal requirement as I talked about. So the evaluation work, as I mentioned, was negotiated a good year before I started and was an eight-year kind of contract. So in terms of the barriers that we encountered, we didn't really foresee COVID, right? So like that wasn't built into flexibility within the contract and how we might think about flexing our health priorities or strategies or what we're willing to fund. We did have a moment of pause and spoke with our Community Benefits Advisory Committee and really tested the pulse to see does this still resonate? Are these still the right priorities? And, you know, similar to the foundation space, there are so many levels of leadership within that community advisory committee and then that particular hospital's leadership. And in the larger health system, there's the large, you know, hospital leadership team and then that particular community benefits advisory committee and just many layers who all want to weigh in. And similar to Dr. Monique, who already really believe that we're already doing good and this is kind of a no brainer. But within COVID and knowing that certain communities were impacted more. Was there a moment of pause to really look at those populations, considering we have this DPH kind of clock ticking, that leadership is really afraid of not spending funds within that required time frame. So I think there's just different opinions of how flexible we can be beyond those requirements versus just what is set in stone and what do we absolutely have to do. And in the time of COVID, DPH was certainly overwhelmed with their response, as we're all the different health systems so it just created a kind of a time of uncertainty. And even though there was opportunity to pause, I still think we did the best that we could. But given what we know now, there may have been more opportunity to pause for a bit longer and to see where the landscape was going to fall

with all the different government interventions in terms of flexible rental assistance and everything else that that was there. So I think we've done our best to build a relationship there. I think in hindsight, to get ahead of some of the barriers, we could have thought through some of the possible circumstances that might have happened throughout the eight years and built in a little more flexibility, even in terms of the number of grantees that we were able to assist. I think one of the problems that I've had to deal with is that there was a number of grantees that was negotiated before I started, and in our particular division we have $18.5 million that we need to invest over a period of of eight years. And so the number 18 was thrown out in the beginning, and I don't know what the logic was, but that really means that each grantee would get about $1,000,000 each, which I don't think was the purpose. And especially in COVID, when there's a lot of smaller organizations who could really benefit from smaller amounts of money or who might even be burdened by receiving $1,000,000 and trying to manage it, especially when the community and even leadership is pressuring us to get past some of the usual entities, you know, giving $1,000,000 to an organization that's never managed, that might not be really helpful without the proper support.

can we compensate people for their planning and design and relationship building time. So that's a part of those scopes and not something that's just presumed will happen outside of or amend it to whenever people have free time to the scope. So I think that's important. And for evaluators yourselves, just be conscious of like how are you going to feel and how much energy regardless of whatever, what hour of your workday this is, how much energy it's going to take for you to show up and process and be the most brilliant evaluator with the client that you can be.

Min Ma: [00:37:48] Building on what Dr. Monique is saying, one of the pieces of advice I wanted to share was around fee schedules, like it is okay to ask for percentage payment up front and actually no one's ever balked at that request from me when I do ask for it, which is helpful for all the reasons already stated. And then I was thinking about worship of the written word and fees schedules that are tied to small deliverables and how restrictive that can be. So I would advise against that and to build in that kind of flexibility you really need. And if you to be co creating an evaluation as you go, you just don't know what you're what's going to actually happen. And so to create a a contract or a fee schedule that allows for that, I think is really important. And then the final thing I'll say, I've signed some scary contracts in the last few years, scary to a small business owner because of the this will happen if you introduce malware into our computer systems, you know, this is how much insurance you need to carry. I have insurance, but an independent consultant might not or it might be a prohibitive amount. And so just to say that these are conversations you should also be having with people when you're signing contracts and asking about them. Oftentimes I've found that it is template language and there is a little bit of wiggle room by nice lawyers on the other side of the table. And then I also wanted to share that for those of you who are independent evaluators or who work with small firms, that there are a lot of resources out there for us. There's the independent consulting TIG through AEA. There are wonderful mastermind groups where you can chat with fellow business owners. They have the topic chats monthly. The Small Business Association also has this amazing mentorship program where you if you have a question about cash flow or legal stuff, that they'll match you with a mentor with that sort of expertise for free. So there's just a lot of really great resources out there. And so you're not alone.

Drew Koleros: [00:40:27] Similar thoughts came to mind when I was thinking about what advice I would give, but I was going to provide it or share it through the lens of a

bigger evaluation firm like Mathematica, and just wanted to kind of lift up Rory's comments earlier that really resonated with me. And I am guilty of talking about foundations like one monolithic thing without understanding the diversity of experiences and people within them. And I think that in a bigger firm like Mathematica its a very similar experience. You know, Mathematica is huge. We've got standard operating procedures on how to sneeze in a place like Mathematica. Everything is automatic and automated, and you can just kind of go through the contract. A new contract comes through and all of the machines start firing and all of their standard risk mitigation processes. Mathematica is early on our journey and equity, and I'll own that. And there's a few of us that are starting to kind of push on those systems to think about how do we alter that machinery to the tradeoff between risk mitigation and inequitable partnerships, and particularly when we're setting up subcontracts or sub agreements with smaller evaluation firms that we're working with, how can we start to advance an equity agenda in that? So it comes down to things like contracting and budgets. Mathematica's lizard brain, knee jerk reaction is reimbursable and deliverables only. But thinking about what Min and Dr. Monique are saying, how could you ever grow your business if you're always playing catch up? How could you ever invest in higher staff that would help you build new business and when you work and do the work that you have, if you're only working on reimbursables and actually a lot of our foundation clients don't do that. They give us the money up front. And we often hold on to it and give our subcontractors reimbursable only or deliverables-based contracts. So fighting back at that, these non-sexy things like the contract. One of the recent fights that we've had is around intellectual property. So standard contract is that we are the prime and we always own the IP and the people that work for us or with us have to relinquish all of their intellectual property rights. Well, when you're co-creating nobody owns that IP, you know, nobody has the rights to that idea. That's something that comes out of this co-creation space that we're through. So we had to work with the legal advisor for quite some time to get that into our contracting templates and all those things exist. So now we're starting to do some internal advocacy with other colleagues at Mathematica that if you want to start entering into more equitable partnerships, here's a contracting template that looks at payment schedules differently. Here's some legal documents that look at IP a little bit differently when we're hiring a transcription firm asking questions like, do they pay a living wage to their employees? What do we know about this organization and their ethical practices and just starting to take a little bit of extra time, but to start to nudge

firm is being kind of tokenized like added to a project because it represents some kind of project diversity that the firm itself doesn't have. And it's an uncomfortable feeling to wonder like, what's really the relationship there? And I think on my side, we in the foundation world could do a better job of like asking questions about what those relationships look like. But I think those sometimes I see those and go like, ooh, or like there's nobody named in the project yet. Things like that that feel like somebody's going to be brought in to do a lot of work at a rate that's really not what they deserve. So those are just a few a few initial thoughts.

Robert Torres: [00:46:57] I think some of the problems in Boston, of course, we have some major firms who are the kind of top candidates always for the larger determination of need projects or hospital projects. I will say hospital kind of budgets for evaluation sometimes our public record, if it's a tie to a deal end, can be found on the Department of Public Health website. The problem is it shows you the whole budget, not not how much has been kind of carved out per contractor affiliated with that evaluation. To Rory's point, I think bringing together smaller, independent evaluators who can pitch a project together would be really helpful so that we could start to land those bigger projects in the non kind of usual evaluators of the larger firms I think would be ideal. And in terms of the red flags, I think there's a lot of expectation from some of the health systems have not done a lot of evaluation work with independent evaluators. And so just taming some of the expectation back and even owning in the front or in the negotiation how much they plan to advocate for the grantees on occasion or even push back on what the what the evaluation requirements are of the individual grantees, I think has become burdensome. And in a health system where a lot of people feel like they are the experts, even if they're not in evaluation, just knowing that that may be a red flag in itself of who is managing the contract. They understand that but they're not an expert in that, and that's why they're bringing on this independent evaluator.

Min Ma: [00:48:40] I don't know what the concrete suggestion is, but I really appreciate how honest other panelists have been about the challenges and power dynamics they're facing, even internally. And I just want to share that a challenge that I face in budgeting is how do I, as I grow my team, how do I sustain salaries? And I'm kind of at the cusp of being able to handle larger contract sizes, which are so helpful. If they're multiyear, then I know I can pay X number of team members for so long, but also thinking about what is not considered to be billable. And I saw a comment in there,

partner leaves an organization and their replacement does not share the same

systems are made up of in Trish's words, fractals and individuals and we all do kind of have a role to play in how we show up in these spaces. And then Sarah added that the patterns that we're setting off with our small decisions and our interactions and pacing and everything, there's a butterfly effect that influences the systems that we are in. So generally systems and also relationships.

Group 2: [01:01:36] For group two the key highlight that we thought tied together a lot of what we talked about was to be explicit about the financial costs and the time costs of each piece of things, because that's the that's when you can actually start to work together and compromise and brainstorm around how to manage those costs rather than

Emily Gates: [01:04:23] Alyssa, you're plugging our next session. So our next all-group session won't be until the fall, but it's going to focus on the methodological process of evaluation from setting the questions to what the process looks like.

Group 4: [01:04:47] So I had a dream team and there's a ton that I have on my slide, so I probably will need the help of my group. But barriers there are a lot of good ones, evaluation as an afterthought and evaluators not being involved in the conversation until it's too late and the funding is set and the timeline is set, and those expectations not being realistic. For evaluation providers, capacities, and the budget because it was all an afterthought. Ingrain policies and procedures that aren't flexible, especially with larger funders and especially government funders. And I really liked this one from Drew, people's past experiences with evaluation harm and trauma and other ways that people have assumptions coming in understandably or based on personal experience, where evaluation was just about assessing merit and value and not about growth and not about relations and relationship building and community all that. And also the idea, the traditional assumptions about evaluation being about a third party who needs to be distant and impartial, and that objectivity or neutrality can exist, and that that's not necessarily what evaluation is about, and especially not equity-oriented evaluation, that that can actually be a way to perpetuate inequity. And then also tons of strategies and learning. Based on investing those barriers that are probably too long to mention, but they're all here on the slide and some good actions kind of conversation about flipping the script and encouraging funders to do the work, do some of the work of maybe they're doing site visits and they're doing some of the traveling and reaching out to build relationships and evaluators, facilitating or negotiating the power dynamics involved between funders and people receiving the funds. And like was mentioned before, kind of being almost like a power broker and trying to advocate for the clients. More forward-thinking, doing away with RFPs.

Emily Gates: [01:08:02] We have our raffle winners, but I think what we'll do for now is we'll email you if you won to save the last bit of time for Min and Maya to share their announcement. And also we want to be thankful to the note-takers. So and in future sessions, we are looking for people to step in and take notes. It just helps us record what's being learned to share out. So we will follow up with the raffle winners and the note-takers with our thank yous and then Min and Maya make your debut here.

through bugs with you as we go. But we're all learning as we do this. And so we appreciate any feedback you have. And for all those pilots