

Learning Partnerships: What They Are and When to Use Them to Advance Your Work



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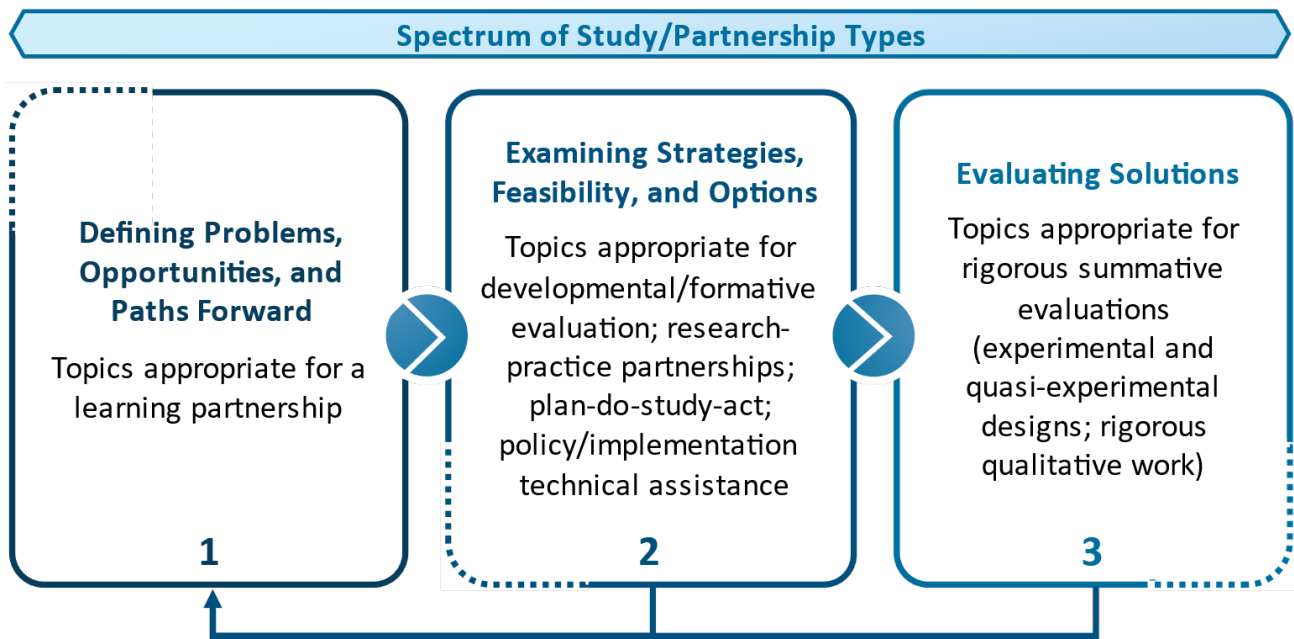
Foundations and other public and nonprofit organizations increasingly express interest in cultivating systems-level change and maximizing their impact through more complex approaches. As organizations look beyond individual interventions and programs, they must think differently and define problems and questions in fundamentally new ways.

AIR has found that traditional approaches used to evaluate more well-defined programs and interventions may not always help those organizations meet the larger, more multifaceted issues they seek to address. Instead, organizations often need thought partnership to clarify learning questions and problems within the context and systems in which they operate, systematically explore new topics, and develop strategies accordingly. We refer to such emerging engagements as “learning partnerships” and discuss what they are and when to use them in this brief. These examples focus on education, including both the K-12 and postsecondary context, but may apply beyond these contexts, as well.

What Are Learning Partnerships?

Although applied researchers often emphasize feedback loops in formative evaluations, learning partnerships go beyond that, starting earlier in the process and taking a broader view. Frequently, learning partnerships are formed when those involved recognize that “there’s a there there,” but it is not something that is quite ready for an evaluation. In such cases, a learning partnership might start with a problem exploration phase. This phase is conducted in close collaboration with local organizations, community members, and/or the affected sector to better understand the context, systems, and opportunities for co-constructed options for moving forward. Another common starting point for a learning partnership is when distinct activities and evaluations are occurring but funders and/or partners recognize that there is an opportunity for broader learning by synthesizing, contextualizing, mapping, and codesigning specific efforts within a systems-level framework.

The following graphic shows where learning partnerships fall on the spectrum of study/partnership types. The graphic indicates that learning partnerships typically emerge when the field, funder, or collaborative are still defining and identifying the problems and opportunities within a system (box 1). In contrast, if the goal is to understand how a program could improve or is being implemented, formative or implementation evaluations typically fit that need (box 2). If the goal is to know whether a specific, well-defined program works, summative evaluations do that job (box 3).



AIR has expertise conducting all three of types of studies/partnerships. This experience enables us to add value to study efforts represented in boxes 2 and 3 by layering learning partner activities on top of what those studies find to inform strategic decisions about what to do next. This is illustrated by the arrows in boxes 2 and 3 going back to box 1, the learning partnership box.

When Should I Use a Learning Partnership?

Learning partnerships can vary based on the client or the topic area. Opportunities for learning partnerships can be challenging to define, but we outline three scenarios that are typically good matches for a learning partnership:



Mapping and framing opportunities. One example of a situation in which a learning partnership may be appropriate is when a complex systems-level problem is emerging but the opportunities or problems are not yet well understood—or the problems are well understood but the potential solutions or paths to addressing those problems are not. In this situation, learning partners can engage in a process of understanding and framing core problems and subproblems and then charting a course forward.

In practice: As a learning partner to a foundation, AIR helped develop a request for proposal process by mapping the field of researchers and questions addressed by those researchers; identifying priorities; engaging the research partners in collective discussions; and synthesizing cross-project learning for more relevant and practice-oriented products.



Synthesizing and sensemaking exploratory efforts. Another example of a situation in which a learning partnership may be appropriate is when a funder is working with multiple grantees on exploratory or early work that is related to the same problem but grantees are taking very different approaches. In these situations, a learning partner can synthesize the work; frame and articulate important differences; and help the group of grantees and funders make sense of the work and takeaways together via a formal and sustained sensemaking process.

In practice: As a learning partner to a different foundation, AIR's first deliverable was to help refine, translate, and operationalize the foundation's broad learning agenda into sets of learning questions, research questions, and evaluation questions. We then developed maps of participating higher education institutions' and partners' planned activities; produced visuals of the partners' roles and contributions; and framed key learning questions and approaches to exploring those questions. Next, we hosted learning workshops for program officers as well as sensemaking sessions with the funded partners to explore the data, context, and meaning of key topics. We then used that collective learning to adjust the focus of subsequent grantee interviews to better support the evolving learning agenda. Together, these steps resulted in more meaningful final reports and synthesis deliverables from AIR that better framed and communicated findings to the field, as well as a framework and language for other grantees to use to map their learning in their storytelling and communication efforts.



Adding on to formative evaluations. A final example of a situation in which a learning partnership may be appropriate is when a project starts as a developmental or formative evaluation and, over time, the people involved recognize that the work is running into issues that speak to broader questions (e.g., questions about strategy viability and refinement). In these cases, an evaluation partner can work with the funder or partner to expand the work to include learning partner components. This expansion might include identifying learning partner-style roles and questions, which can help situate and formally create space for collective interpretation and sensemaking.

In practice: As a learning and evaluation partner to two initiatives, AIR started off as a formative evaluator; however, over time, it became clear that the group did not yet have a common understanding of the initiative, opportunities, or theory of change. AIR facilitated a collaborative process for reframing the initiative and developing new theories of change. In addition, we conducted abbreviated landscape scans on key topics emerging from the initiative; identified additional learning questions that connected changes within the institutions to the systems in which institutions operated; and co-led sensemaking sessions with partners to place the initiative within a broader context. Ultimately, we helped to build common understanding of the initiative, opportunities, and theory of change. From this increased clarity, the foundation could better target their investment efforts.

AIR's Approach

As a learning partner, AIR prioritizes a flexible and intentional strategy for learning, typically oriented around syntheses of related problems and situating observations together within a broader framework. In best-case scenarios, AIR works alongside funders and other grantees to (a) understand what the explicit and implicit goals are; (b) identify key assumptions or contextual issues; and (c) codesign (and refine) learning questions, potential studies or strategies, and other approaches to achieve overall objectives.

There is no single approach to a learning partnership, but AIR's experience in several different learning partner roles helps us to recognize opportunities for productive learning partnerships, apply thoughtful strategies to support the success of our partners' efforts, and scope meaningful deliverables that move partnerships forward.

We welcome the opportunity to learn more about the work or interested foundations and discuss how a learning partnership could help advance it.