PUSHING THE ENVELOPE OF MIXED METHODS EVALUATION TO LEARN FROM IMPACT STUDIES

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Westat-APPAM Institutional Member Forum

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TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

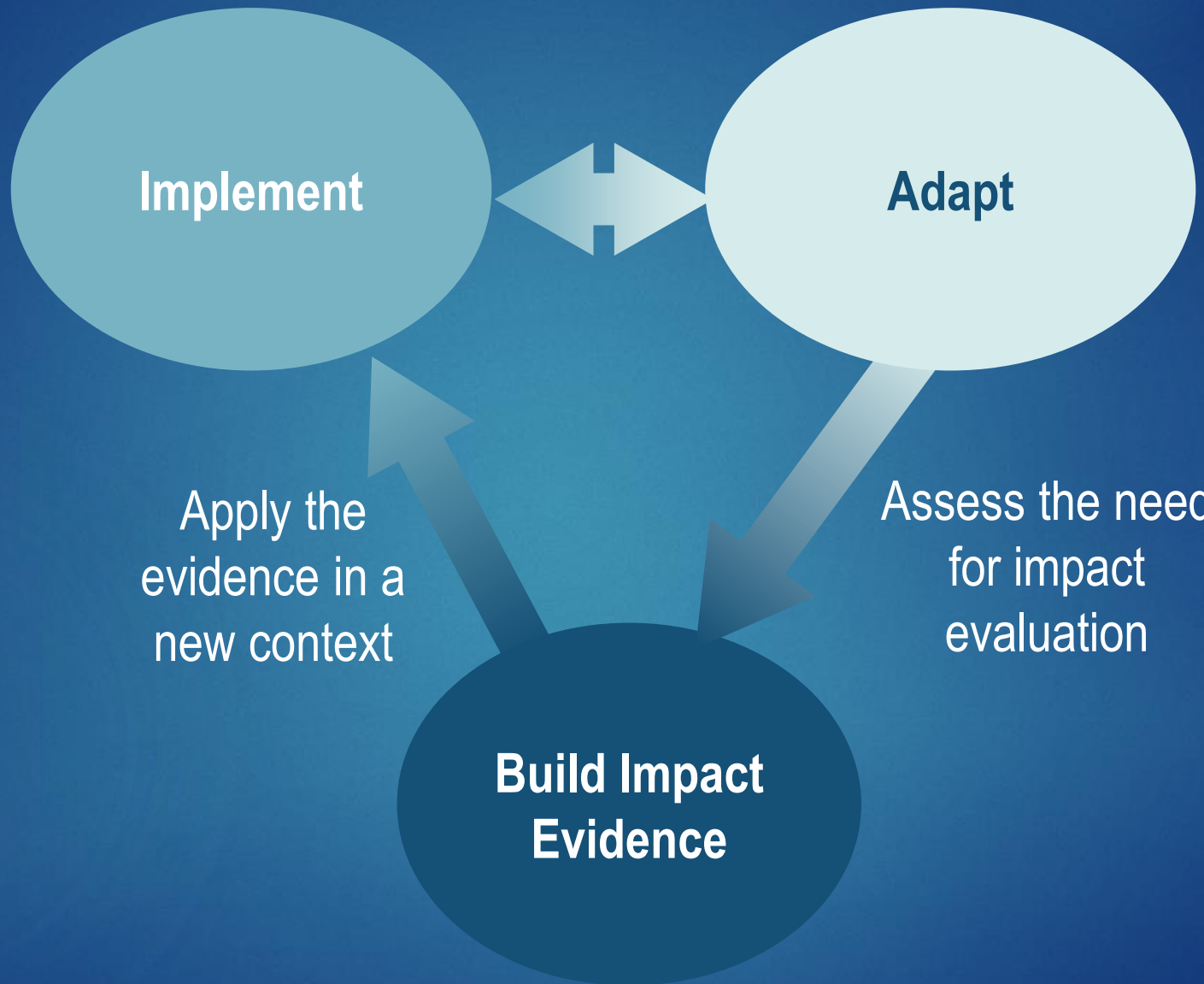# FOUR ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

- ➢ **Design** mixed method impact studies to understand effectiveness and inform future improvement

- ➢ **Decide** on a deep dive that will inform the field

- ➢ **Distinguish** between studying the program model and its implementation

- ➢ **Deploy** integrated and iterative data collection and analysis approaches

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~~Does this program work?~~

How can this study provide an empirically-based road map for greater impact the *next time* this strategy is implemented?

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Implement ⟷ Adapt

Apply the evidence in a new context

Assess the need for impact evaluation

Build Impact Evidence

Knox, Hill, Berlin 2018

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Fidelity

We often need to ask **what** was intended and **whether** it was implemented as planned

- ➤ Was the intervention implemented as intended?
- ➤ What were the roadblocks? What challenges did the staff face in implementation?

Beyond fidelity

Asking questions about *how* may be more likely to inform future improvement

- How does this model propose to change people's behavior or outcomes?
- How do these potential mechanisms differ from business as usual?
- How does implementation or responses of participants vary depending on characteristics of participants, front line staff, implementation organizations, communities, systems, or policies?

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DEEP DIVE:

THE THEORY OF CHANGE "UNDERSTANDING MECHANISMS"

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EXAMPLE: Making Pre-K Count

➢ Scant research on model's key component, differentiated instruction

➢ Research challenge: Document an individualized process

➢ Solution: Observations followed immediately by teacher interviews to hear teachers' reflections on their process

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EXAMPLE: Making Pre-K Count

- Findings: Teachers had more difficulty differentiating instruction for low-skilled students

  - Impact study: Larger impacts for students with higher skills

  - Implication: Teachers may need different support to differentiate instruction for low-skilled students:

DEEP DIVE:

EMBED TESTS THAT SYSTEMATICALLY VARY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

➤ Example: Paycheck Plus

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Interventions often aim to change the behavior or outcomes of two different sets of people – program staff and participants

Implications:

➢ Be intentional about which level(s) of the theory of change your study aims to illuminate

➢ Your data collection and analysis may require different units of analysis – entire program; individual staff members; or individual participants

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Example: Head Start CARES

Implement new social-emotional curriculum in preschool

Train and coach teachers on the curriculum

→

Children experience more activities about identifying and understanding their emotions

→

Improved social emotional outcomes for children

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EXAMPLE: PACE Center for Girls

➢ Research challenge: How to estimate costs for different program components?

➢ Mixed methods approach:

  ➢ Conducted initial site visits to understand program components

  ➢ Used that information to define program components in time-use surveys

  ➢ Concluded that social services (and not other components) were much more intensive for the program group than the control group

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