



A Guide to the ISL Professional Competency Framework



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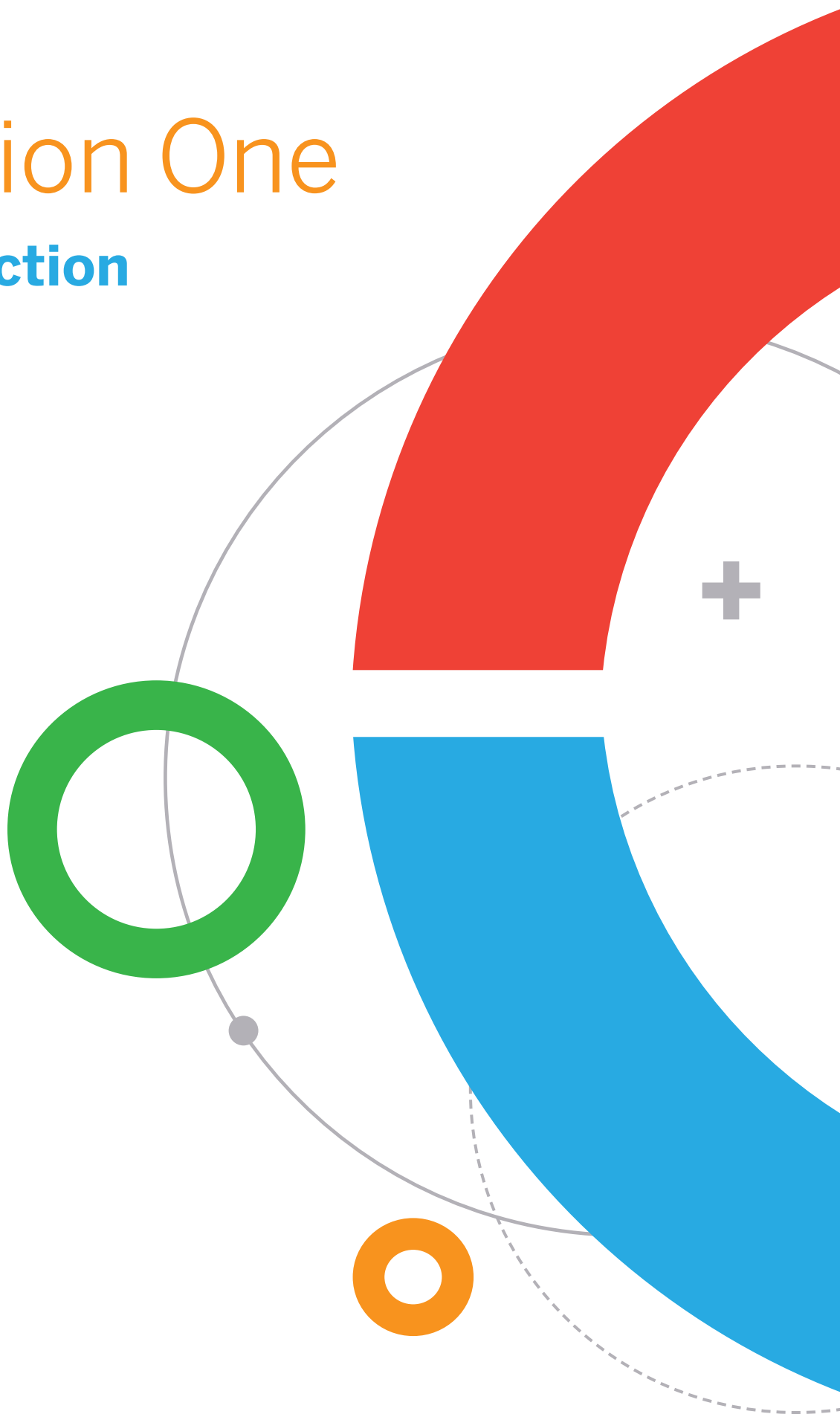
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Section One

Introduction



Overview of the Framework

Informal STEM Learning (ISL) organizations such as science centers, aquariums, and natural history museums play a vital role in stimulating public interest and engagement in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). That work is largely dependent on the competencies of the individuals who work within the ISL field. The ISL Professional Competency Framework is a robust and flexible tool for understanding and advancing the skills, knowledge, and capabilities of those individuals. This guide was developed to support the use of the online version of the framework.

The competencies described in the framework were identified through a national study with professionals across the country, working at different levels and in different functions in museums, science centers, zoos, and other educational settings. While each job and each institution is unique, the competencies in this framework cut across most functions. They are the competencies that define professionalism in the ISL field. This guide can be used to explore the purpose of the framework and potential applications in a range of settings. For example:

- Individuals might use the framework to assess current competencies, to consider areas to deepen or expand competencies, and to gather evidence about current competencies.
- Organizations or institutions might use the framework to develop a comprehensive professional development plan, to consider staffing plans, or to shape job positions.
- Academic programs might use the framework to review curriculum or support student learning, and their students might use it to consider courses or internships they want to pursue.

Why a Framework?

ISL work is difficult. Learning how to reach, engage, inspire, and inform public audiences is a significant and lifelong challenge. Our society, our knowledge-base, and the interactions between society and STEM knowledge are complicated, sophisticated, and ever-changing.

ISL professionals are unique. People come to ISL work from many fields, and the career path is different for each person. This diversity brings a wealth of knowledge, expertise, commitment, and passion to the field, but it also leaves individuals or organizations with gaps.

If you are exploring the ISL Professional Competency Framework, you probably know that ISL work requires a unique set of skills. Perhaps your experiences or your education has led you to a point where you want a better sense of what you know and what you don't know. Perhaps you're wondering how to take the next step in your career, or maybe you are in a leadership position and want to help your staff take the next step. Maybe you work in an ISL institution, but you don't know if you consider yourself an ISL professional. The framework is designed for you.

Who is a Professional?

There is no simple or agreed-upon definition of a profession, but most agree that professions share at least these characteristics:

- The work is complex, not routine, and grounded in theory and research. Therefore, it requires specialized skills, knowledge, and behaviors.
- The work provides a critical service to society and therefore those who work in the profession adhere to standards and values that maintain its commitment to and credibility in society.

Whether you write exhibit labels or write annual reports, whether you lead tours or lead an institution, whether you study budgets or study visitor experiences—your work requires specialized skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The work you do on a day-to-day basis is rarely routine and the tasks you must accomplish often require problem-solving and creative thinking. Your work requires professional competencies. As a professional, you are also expected to adhere to the values and principles adopted by the field and to meet the standards set by the field, particularly those related to your specific area of work. As an ISL professional, you will never stop learning. The framework can help you be strategic and deliberate in your learning.

What is Evidence-based Practice?

Evidence-based practice is grounded in research, evaluation, and knowledge of effective and emerging practices. Research and evaluation studies help us make decisions about the nature and delivery of programs or exhibits and can inform the policies and practices of an organization. Evidence-based practice uses research or evaluation to test assumptions, shape intentions, and measure impact. This framework is described as evidence-based for two reasons: 1) the competencies described here were identified through research and evaluation, and 2) the framework encourages practices that rely on and develop evidence of competency.

What are Competencies?

Competencies are the skills, knowledge, values, and other capabilities that enable a person to act effectively in a job or situation. The ISL Professional Competency Framework describes the suite of competencies that are associated with successful practice within the ISL field. The framework provides a map for you to pinpoint where you are and where you might want to go.

What is STEM?

STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and math. These specialized areas of knowledge are continually emerging, evolving, and intersecting and the term STEM is typically used broadly. The framework was developed through research with professionals who work in informal STEM learning environments, including zoos, science centers, natural history museums, aquaria and other educational settings. While developed for the ISL field, other types of informal learning environments have used the framework.

Creating a Learning Path

Professional learning refers to the process of developing the specific competencies that are necessary to achieve goals and aspirations in a chosen area(s) of work. Professional learning is most successful when it is strategic, deliberate, and motivated by personal goals and interests combined with an informed understanding of the field. Professional development refers to the process of providing learning experiences that advance the competencies of individuals or groups of individuals. Professional development is most successful when it is designed collaboratively with the learners, evidence-based, embedded in jobs, and aligned with the values, priorities, and needs of the field.

The term learning pathway is often used to refer to the range of models and approaches for learning the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to enter and succeed in an occupation. An individual may include any combination of academic work, internships, participating in a professional organization, workshops, online platforms, or learning from a colleague or mentor. The framework can help individuals create a professional learning path based on circumstances, goals, learning style, personal preferences, and career aspirations. The framework can also help organizations and institutions create professional development strategies for their staff and stakeholders based on institutional goals, resources, priorities, opportunities and other circumstances.

Section Two:

Overview of the ISL Professional Competency Framework



Levels of Progression

Learning paths take many forms influenced by emerging research, changes in the needs and interests of society, and changes in personal interests or opportunities. Some professionals describe their learning path as an upward trajectory, pointed towards a clear career goal. Others describe their path as more irregular, resembling steps or, more often, an erratic bumpy line. The research behind the framework found that competencies were often described within three broad categories, represented in the framework as levels. These levels do often overlap, but are generally distinguished by the scope, scale, and sphere of engagement. These dimensions are described below.

Sphere of Engagement

The sphere of people that professionals learn from or influence often expands across a career. As competencies develop or job positions change, individuals may learn from, and influence, other individuals across and outside their institutions. A professional may eventually become an expert in a particular competency with influence across the field. For example, a floor interpreter might excel in program delivery in their early career, working mostly with other floor interpreters. They might become an experience-manager, managing a volunteer program and working with other departments across the institution. Then they might move into a position as Director of Education and Visitor Experiences, eventually becoming a leader in the field on a particular topic or strategy for engaging audiences. This expansion of a sphere of engagement is one of the dimensions that characterizes the different levels of competencies.

Figure 1: Levels described by Sphere of Engagement

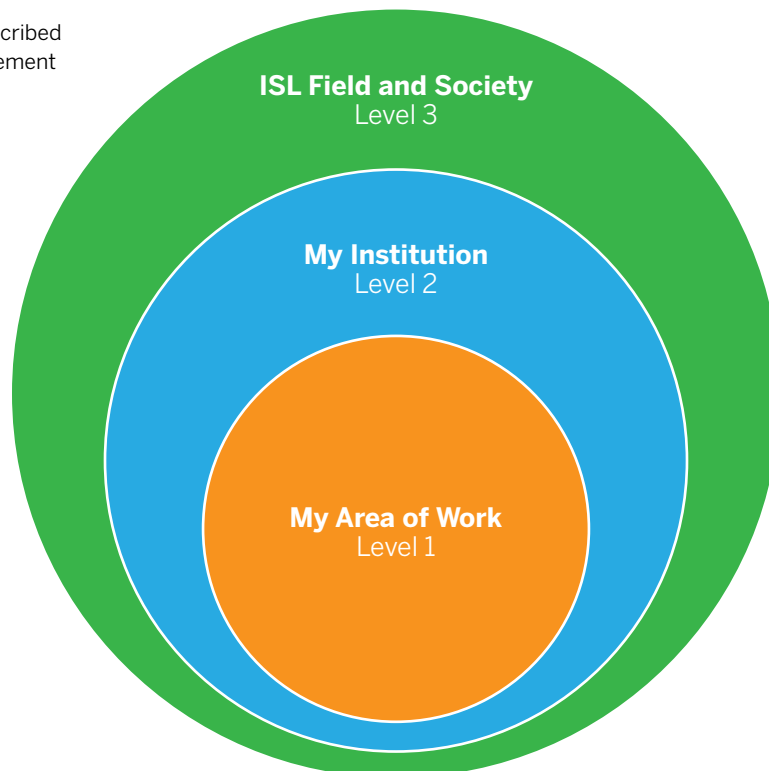
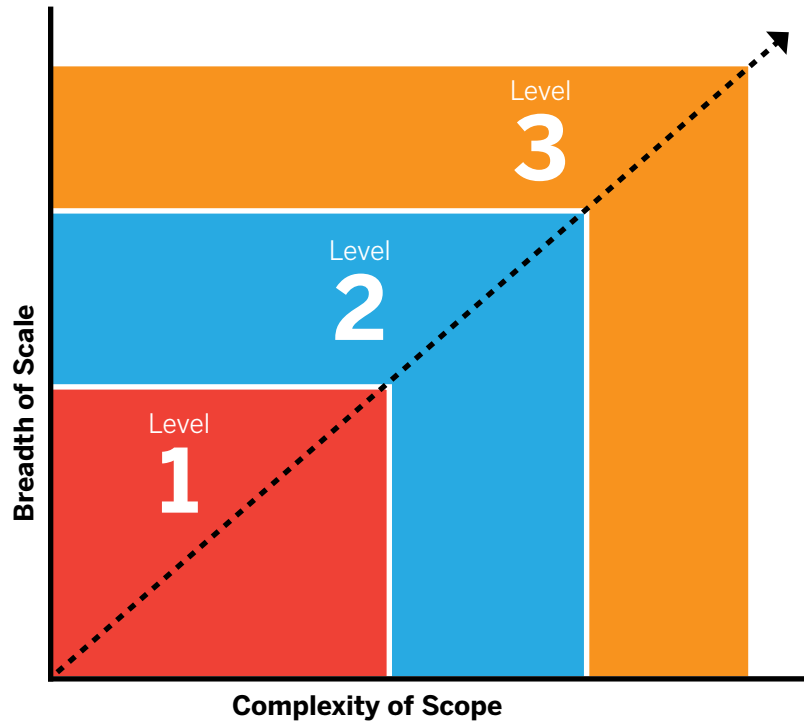


Figure 2: Levels by Scope and Scale



Scope & Scale

As professionals deepen and expand their competencies, or expand their sphere of engagement, the scope and scale of the work may also evolve, requiring more complex competencies. At one point in an individual's career, the tasks and challenges may be clear with only a few variables to consider, such as planning a Saturday family event at the zoo or writing labels for an interactive exhibit at a science center. As a career develops, the tasks may become more complex and broader in scope, involving a greater number of factors and uncertainties, like planning a conference on STEM learning for professionals across the country or developing a traveling exhibit that can be successful in STEM and non-STEM based institutions. This expansion of the scale or scope of work is another dimension of progressing through levels.

Choosing your Level

Should everyone aspire to the highest level in all the competencies? Probably not. Most professionals find a balance between the level of competency that is appropriate for a current position and the level that aligns with their career goals or desired impact within the field. For example, a director of finance might need to be competent at the second or third level in the finance category. However, a director of a zoo or head of education might only need to understand budgets at the first level to be effective in their position, but might need a higher level of competencies in general expertise to be able to manage their staff.

The framework describes the competencies that research has identified as associated with successful ISL work but it does not prescribe or recommend what level any professional should obtain. Individual and institutional priorities and goals should guide the development of any learning path. The level of proficiency or expertise in each area will be influenced by your circumstances, preferences, and opportunities.

Domains of the Framework

The ISL Professional Learning Framework includes four domains of competencies: Job-Specific Expertise, General Expertise, Institutional Operations, and Institutional Impact. Each of these domains has four categories of competencies. The following pages describe the domains, followed by the full framework.



Figure 3: Categories by competencies in the four domains of framework

Domain: Job-Specific Expertise

This domain describes the competencies specific to a person's area of work. The term *practice* is used to refer to all the activities, routines, tasks, and work that professionals do each day to produce products, programs, or services. Effective practice and efficient practice are interdependent, and one should not be achieved at the expense of the other. Professionals become more effective and more efficient in their work through Professional Learning and Evidence-based Practice. The four categories of competencies in this domain are:



- **Effective Practice** regularly identifies and achieves intended goals for an identified audience. At Level One, competent professionals provide programs, services, and products that achieve intended outcomes. During their career, some professionals may develop or manage effective programs, services, and products (Level Two), and may become experts and create or contribute to practices that address increasingly complex goals of the ISL field (Level Three).
- **Efficient Practice** maximizes the use of available resources. Competent professionals at Level One use tools and strategies that achieve desired outcomes with appropriate resources. Professionals may implement or manage processes and strategies that increase the efficiency of their institution (Level Two) or of the field (Level Three).
- **Evidence-based Practice** is grounded in research, evaluation, and knowledge of effective and emerging practices. Competent professionals make decisions about their work based on evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of specific strategies or actions (Level One). Some professionals may influence or contribute to the use of evidence in the decisions, plans, and actions of their institutions (Level Two) and some professionals may advocate for and contribute to the field's evidence-base of effective and efficient practices (Level Three).
- **Professional Learning** is a self-directed, systematic process of selecting or creating learning experiences to gain desired competencies. Competent professionals participate in learning experiences that advance their professional and personal goals (Level One) and may also contribute to the development of professional learning for others in their institutions (Level Two) or across the field (Level Three).

Domain: General Expertise

This domain describes how we interact with our work and work environment. Often called soft skills, professionals continually develop the ways they understand and interact with their social and professional environment. The four categories of competencies in this domain are:



- **Intrapersonal Knowledge & Skills** refers to the ways in which individuals reflect upon and understand themselves. At Level One, competent professionals understand the values and attitudes they bring to their work. They can also encourage practices that recognize and reward intrapersonal reflection, knowledge, and skills within their institution (Level Two) or the field (Level Three).
- **Interpersonal Knowledge & Skills** relates to the ability to interact with others. Competent professionals acknowledge and respect the values and attitudes they hold and express, as well as those of others (Level One). They may also support and influence collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships within their institution (Level Two) or outside their institution (Level Three).
- **Communication** competencies describe the various ways that professionals share and receive ideas and thoughts. Competent professionals demonstrate effective and ethical communication skills in their work (Level One). Some professionals create and influence strategic communication skills at a broader scale and scope or through a greater range of communication mechanisms across their institution (Level Two) or the ISL field (Level Three).
- **Creative & Analytical Thinking** describes the skills used to consider situations and problems. At Level One, competent professionals demonstrate creative and analytical thinking skills in their work. They may become more proficient and begin to identify and address increasingly complex problems (Level Two) and influence and support the capacity of the ISL field to address societal goals and problems through creative and analytical thinking (Level Three).

Domain: Institutional Operations

This domain focuses on the ways that institutions and organizations operate. This area is often referred to as the internal environment or the infrastructure that supports more public activities. Professionals can progress from understanding how their institution operates to managing or leading organizations across the field. The four categories of competencies in this domain are:



- **Mission, Vision & Goals** refers to understanding the purpose, values, and direction of institutions and organizations. At Level One, competent professionals understand and support the mission, vision, and goals of their institution. Some individuals might influence or contribute to the direction of their institution (Level Two) or of the ISL field (Level Three).
- **Structure** refers to understanding the organization of—and relationships between—functional units of an institution. Competent professionals understand and navigate the organizational structure of their institution (Level One). Some professionals might also manage or contribute to organizational structures within their institution (Level Two) or the ISL field (Level Three).
- **Policies** refers to the implicit and explicit guidelines, rules, regulations, and protocols that guide operations. Competent professionals understand policies and expectations within their institution (Level One). Professionals can develop the competencies to influence and contribute to their institution's policies (Level Two) or within the ISL field (Level Three).
- **Finances** refers to the ways that fiscal resources are acquired, committed, and expended. Competent professionals understand budgets related to their area of work (Level One). They might provide financial leadership within their institution (Level Two) or across the ISL field (Level Three).

Domain: Institutional Impact

This domain describes the competencies that relate to the impact of institutions. Professionals can progress from understanding the intended and achieved impact of their institution's programs and products to influencing and contributing to the articulation, implementation, and study of the ways that ISL institutions interact with and contribute to society. The four categories of competencies in this domain are:



- **Audiences** refers to the individuals, groups, and communities that engage with ISL organizations. Competent professionals identify outcomes for their work that align with an informed understanding of audiences (Level One). Some professionals may identify intended and achieved outcomes for their institution (Level Two), or for the field (Level Three), that align with an understanding of ISL audiences and of society.
- **Role** refers to the ways that institutions interact with and impact society. Competent professionals understand the role of ISL institutions in society and the history of their institution within their community (Level One). Professionals can also influence and contribute to the role of their institution (Level Two) and advance the aspirations and capacity of the ISL field to impact society (Level Three).
- **Equity & Diversity** refers to the characteristics of an equitable and culturally responsive work environment. Competent professionals demonstrate these competencies through their interactions and ongoing responsibilities (Level One). Professionals can also contribute to equitable and responsive actions within their institution (Level Two) or they may advance the role of the ISL field in building an equitable and diverse society (Level Three).
- **Evaluation & Research** refers to the practice of engaging in systematic inquiry. Competent professionals understand the processes, purpose, and general results of research and evaluation in ISL (Level One). Professionals might also influence and contribute to the use of research and evaluation within their institution (Level Two) or the ISL field (Level Three).

Institutional Operations

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Mission, Vision, and Goals	Understand and support the mission, vision, and goals of my institution	Influence and contribute to the mission, vision, and goals of my institution.	Influence and contribute to the mission, vision, and goals of the ISL field.
Structure	Understand and navigate the organizational structure of my institution.	Manage and contribute to the organizational structure of my institution.	Create and contribute to organizational structures within the ISL field.
Policies	Understand the policies and expectations of my institution.	Manage and contribute to the policies and practices of my institution.	Create and contribute to the policies and practices of the ISL field.
Finances	Understand budgets that relate to my area of work.	Identify, develop, and manage sources of income and expenditures within my institution.	Provide financial leadership for projects, programs, and products within the ISL field.

Institutional Impact

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Audiences	Identify intended and achieved outcomes for my area of work that align with an understanding of audiences.	Identify intended and achieved outcomes for my institution that align with an understanding of my community and of the ISL field.	Identify intended and achieved outcomes for the ISL field that align with an understanding of society and of the ISL field.
Role	Understand the role of ISL institutions in society and the history of my institution within my community.	Influence and contribute to the impact, reputation, and value of my institution.	Advance the aspirations and the capacity of the ISL field to impact society.
Equity & Diversity	Understand and support the characteristics of an equitable and culturally-responsive work environment.	Influence and contribute to equitable and responsive practices within my institution and the ISL field.	Advance the role of ISL institutions in building an equitable and vibrant society.
Evaluation & Research	Understand the processes, purpose, and results of research and evaluation within my area of work.	Influence and contribute to the use of research and evaluation within my institution.	Influence and contribute to the use of research and evaluation within the ISL field.

Job-Specific Expertise

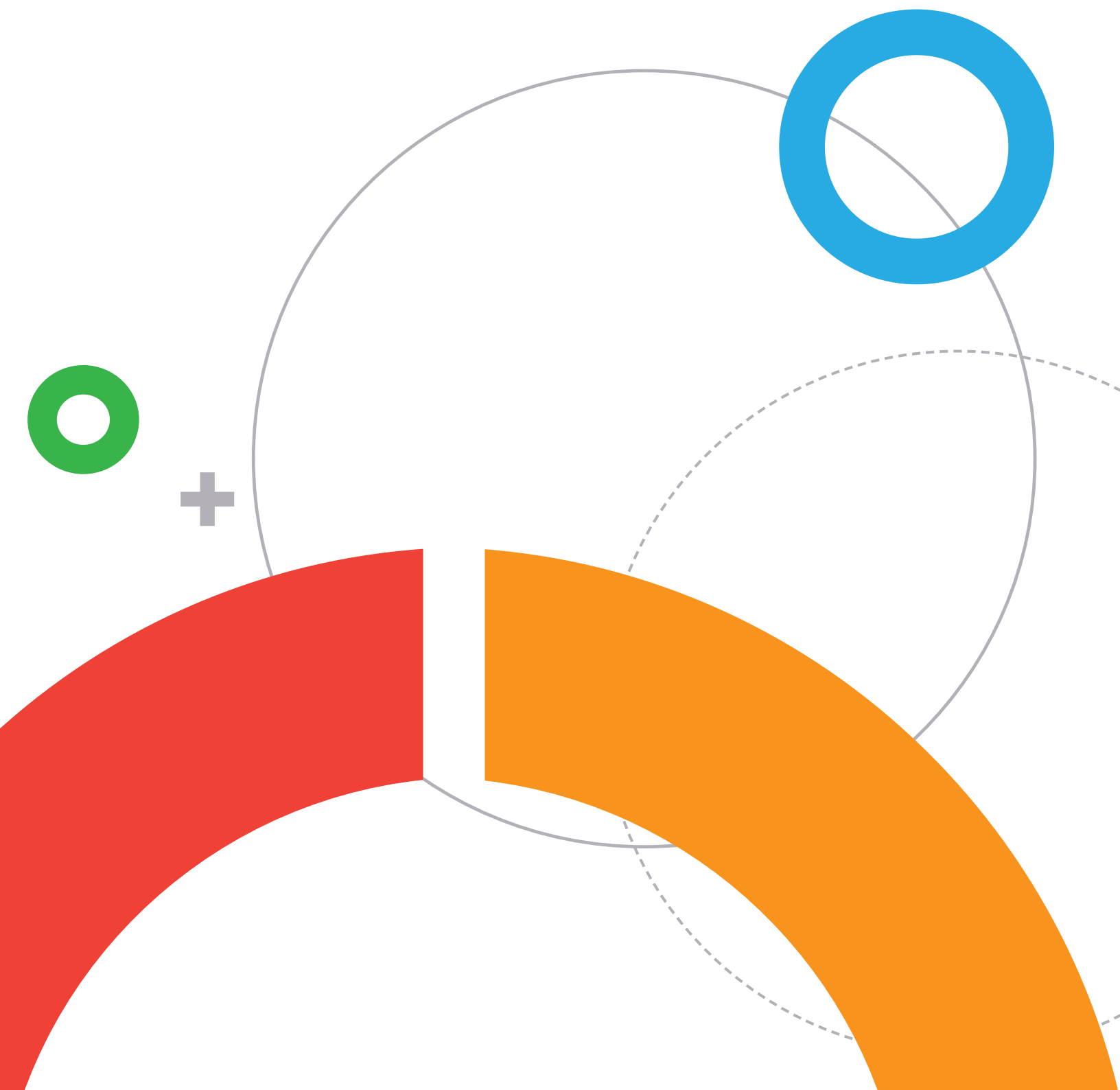
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Effective Practice	Provide programs, services, and products that achieve intended outcomes.	Develop or manage programs, services, and products that achieve intended outcomes.	Create or contribute to ISL practices that achieve increasingly complex intended outcomes.
Efficient Practice	Use tools and strategies in my work to minimize the resources that are necessary to achieve desired outcomes.	Implement or manage processes and practices that use minimum resources necessary to achieve maximum outcomes.	Create or contribute to ISL practices that maximize the impact of available resources.
Evidence-based Practice	Make decisions about my area of work based on evidence about effectiveness and efficiency.	Influence or contribute to the use of evidence in the decisions, plans, and actions of my institution.	Advocate for and contribute to evidence about effective and efficient practices in the ISL field.
Professional Learning	Participate in professional learning that advances my professional and personal goals.	Influence or contribute to professional development opportunities for myself and others.	Create and advocate for professional learning opportunities across and throughout the ISL field.

General Expertise

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Intrapersonal Knowledge & Skills	Understand and respect the values, attitudes, and behaviors that I bring to my work.	Encourage institutional practices that recognize and reward intrapersonal reflection, knowledge, and skills.	Create and support ISL practices that recognize intrapersonal reflection, knowledge, and skills.
Interpersonal Knowledge & Skills	Acknowledge and respect the values, attitudes, and behaviors of myself and of others within my institution.	Support and influence collaborative and mutually-beneficial relationships within my institution.	Create and support collaborative and mutually-beneficial relationships within and outside the ISL field.
Communication	Demonstrate effective and ethical communication skills in my work.	Support and influence effective and ethical communication skills with a range of audiences and using a range of media.	Create and support strategic communication skills that advance the work of the ISL field in society.
Creative & Analytical Thinking	Demonstrate creative and analytical thinking skills in my area of work.	Use creative and analytical thinking skills to address increasingly complex problems and opportunities within my institution.	Use creative and analytical thinking skills to influence and support the capacity of the field to address societal goals and problems.

Section Three

Professional Learning



ISL Professional Competency Survey

Professional competencies are complex, dynamic, and situational: recognizing or achieving competency looks different for each person and in each circumstance. Assessing competencies should be done with considerable thought, flexibility, and personalization. While competencies cannot be objectively measured, they can be reliably described using indicators of competencies and evidence of achieving or demonstrating a particular level.

The ISL Professional Competency Survey provides four to six indicators for each level of competency. These indicators are not proof of attaining a specific level of competency, however demonstrating multiple indicators should provide reasonable confidence about a competency. Due to the unique characteristics of each position and each institution, you may find that some of the indicators do not apply to you.

To use the survey, start with one domain (or level) rather than trying to go through the full assessment at one time. For each indicator, consider what type of accomplishment or behavior would reasonably be considered evidence of that indicator. Try to identify a range of sources of evidence in your work, including ones that consider less subjective sources, such as results from an evaluation of a project you directed, a program you developed or presented, a review of an exhibit you developed, or an article published in a peer-reviewed journal.

You might engage a colleague in collaboratively discussing the assessment. You might keep it in a convenient location at work to periodically review and jot notes. You might even use the survey to plan your annual review.

This version of the ISL Professional Competency Framework Guide only includes indicators for the first level of competencies. Future versions will include the second and third levels, as well as suggestions for identifying and describing evidence of indicators.

Job-Specific Expertise

Competency Indicators for Level One

Effective Practice: Provide effective programs, services, and products.

- I provide programs, services, or products that meet stated goals for specific audiences.
- I feel confident in my ability to provide effective programs, services, or products.
- I receive positive feedback or job performance reviews from colleagues or supervisors.
- I know and am committed to best practices in my area of work.
- People sometimes describe me as effective or “good at my job.”

Efficient Practice: Use tools and strategies that increase my efficiency without compromising effectiveness.

- I meet deadlines.
- I identify and monitor resources that are necessary and allocated for my specific responsibilities.
- I use a range of technology tools.
- I keep my workspace organized.
- I use my time efficiently.
- People sometimes describe me as efficient.

Evidence-based Practice: Make decisions about my area of work based on evidence about effectiveness or efficiency in meeting intended outcomes.

- I sometimes refer to resources in national repositories of evaluation and research studies.
- I read evaluation reports or audience studies related to my work.
- I question and assess the effectiveness and efficiency of decisions related to my work.
- I often ask “Why?” or “What evidence supports that approach?”
- I solicit feedback from visitors or audiences.
- I ask colleagues to observe my work and provide feedback.

Professional Learning: Participate in professional learning that advances my professional and personal goals.

- I participate in professional learning opportunities.
- I reflect on my professional learning as it relates to my job description and my career goals.
- I solicit feedback and apply it to my work.
- I read journals or online content from professional organizations.
- I think of myself as a professional.

General Expertise

Competency Indicators for Level One

Intrapersonal Knowledge & Skills:

Demonstrate initiative, self-reflection, and perseverance in my area of work.

- I regularly reflect on my responsibilities and the results of my work.
- I am aware of my values, attitudes, and behaviors at work.
- I am aware of my strengths and limitations.
- I work well independently.
- I authentically demonstrate enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards my work and colleagues.
- I address complications or problems when they arise.

Interpersonal Knowledge & Skills:

Acknowledge and respect the values, attitudes, and behaviors of myself and of others in my institution.

- I recognize and appreciate the values, attitudes, and behavior of others.
- When listening to others, I pay attention to their body language and tone of voice.
- I listen without interpreting others' motives.
- I avoid defensiveness when giving or receiving feedback.
- I demonstrate respect for coworkers and collaborators.

Communication: Demonstrate effective and ethical communication skills in my work.

- Before I communicate, I consider what I want to say and what the person needs to know.
- I consider when email, phone, or in-person communication is best.
- I edit and proofread all written communication.
- I avoid communication that is potentially harmful to others.
- I consider timing, wording, and priorities in my communication.
- I am comfortable communicating formally and informally.

Creative & Analytical Thinking:

Demonstrate creative and analytical thinking skills in my area of work.

- I recognize and attempt to solve problems creatively.
- I make clear and timely decisions based on evidence and input from various sources.
- I know the characteristics, advantages, and limitations of brainstorming.

Institutional Operations

Competency Indicators for Level One

Mission, Vision, & Goals: Understand and articulate the mission, vision, and goals of my institution.

- I can state the mission and the vision of my institution.
- I understand the purpose of a mission and a vision.
- I have read or heard the goals of my department or institution.
- I consider the mission, vision, or goals in making decisions about programs or products.
- I discuss the mission, vision, or goals with colleagues.

Structure: Understand and navigate the organizational structure of my institution.

- I know the departments of my institution and have a general understanding of what they do.
- I know who to go to with problems or questions about HR, safety, security, supplies, or other issues related to my job.
- I understand the role of my supervisor within the institution.

Policies: Understand the policies and expectations within my institution.

- I know the governing authority of my institution.
- I have access to core institutional documents, such as the code of ethics.
- I understand the expectations of my position and how those expectations fit within my department or institution.
- I know my rights and my responsibilities as an employee.

Finances: Understand budgets that relate to my area of work and use resources efficiently.

- I know what supplies or resources are available for my work.
- I can describe the sources of income and expenses for my programs or products.
- I regularly align my actions with available resources.
- I appreciate the value and importance of creating and adhering to budgets.
- I understand the income streams that support my area of work.

Institutional Impact

Competency Indicators for Level One

Audience: Identify intended and achieved outcomes for my area of work that align with an understanding of visitors and audiences.

- I can describe the characteristics of the audience my programs or products intend to serve.
- I know who engages with and benefits from the programs, products, or services I provide.
- I understand the difference between outcomes and outputs.
- I identify and support intended outcomes for my programs or products.

Role: Understand the role of ISL institutions in society and the history of my institution in my community.

- I can describe the values and general principles of informal learning.
- I know the history of my institution and the history of its relationship within the community.
- I am familiar with standards or core values of professional organizations related to my work.
- I understand the characteristics of and differences between mission, vision, principles, goals, and objectives.

Equity & Diversity: Understand and support the characteristics of an equitable and culturally responsive work environment.

- I understand and consider the differences between equity and equality.
- I can describe and discuss a range of ways diversity is considered and experienced.
- I communicate and engage with community groups that share goals or audiences with my area of work.
- I understand some of the ways institutional practices and individual habits can create work environments that are uncomfortable.
- I advocate for and engage in practices that are fair and transparent.
- Evaluation & Research: Understand the processes, purpose, and general results of research and evaluation in ISL.
- I understand and appreciate the potential for evaluation to guide my work.
- I am aware of the field of evaluation and visitor studies and know where to find evaluation reports or research that might inform my work.
- I collect or review data about the programs, products, or services I provide.

Credits

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