Learning Agendas & Evidence to Inform Programs and Policies

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Overview

• Context
• Lessons and insights from Department of Labor experience
• Ways agencies can use learning agendas to strengthen their use of evidence regardless of current capacity
• Urban Institute Federal Evaluation Forum
  ➢ Webinars, workshops, conferences, website
  ➢ https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/evidence-based-policy-capacity
Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act & Draft Data Action Plan

- **Learning Agenda.** Requires a multi-year “systematic” plan (Learning Agenda) to identify and address key research/evaluation questions related to policies, programs, regulations; and with input from stakeholders.

- **Evaluation Plan.** Requires an “evaluation plan” about how the key questions will be addressed; broad definition of “evaluation”.

- **Senior Chief Officers.** Requires each agency to have an Evaluation Officer and a Statistical Officer (in the statistical unit) who, among other duties coordinate in developing the learning agenda and evaluation plan; requires a Chief Data Officer for data access and privacy.

- **Data Access and Privacy.** Requires federal data be publicly available (as the default) with privacy and confidentiality provisions; and develop, maintain and update a data inventory.

- **Evidence Capacity.** Agency activities (e.g., plans, clearinghouses) and cross-agency coordination (e.g., data access, data synchronization, open data, joint studies and evaluation).

***NO SINGLE WAY THAT ALL AGENCIES MUST PROCEED***
Evidence = Program Evaluation + Performance Monitoring + Research & Statistical Analysis (+Experiential)
# Many types of “evaluations”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Evaluation</th>
<th>Recognizable Features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Net Impact Analysis</td>
<td>Causal impact; Random assignment; control group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quasi/non-experimental Net Impact Analysis</td>
<td>Causal impact; multivariate statistical modeling; comparison group(s)</td>
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<td>Cost-Benefit/Cost-effectiveness Analysis</td>
<td>Cost analysis, ROI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statistical, Performance and Outcome Analysis</td>
<td>Program outcome analysis and performance measurement; participant tracking; statistical simulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation &amp; Process Analysis/Implementation Science</td>
<td>Field-based organizational analysis; program and service descriptions; observational analysis; surveys; qualitative &amp; quantitative analysis</td>
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Evidence capacity “continuum” and models

- Agencies are at different stages in terms of their evidence culture and activities:
  - Interested in building capacity
  - Basic evaluation or performance capacity
  - Basic evaluation and performance capacity
  - Established evaluation & performance capacity
Agencies have different types of departmental-level Evaluation Offices/Officers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Sub agency role</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Broad Chief Evaluation Office/Officer</strong></td>
<td>• Provides expertise, coordination &amp; guidance on evaluation policies and activities department-wide; funds/directs many evaluations</td>
<td>• Officer leads an independent evaluation-only (or primarily) office and dedicated evaluation staff</td>
<td>• Dedicated funding for evaluation staff and evaluations</td>
<td>• Sub agencies may also have evaluation offices, funding, responsibilities</td>
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<td><strong>Coordinating Chief Evaluation Office/Officer</strong></td>
<td>• Provides expertise, coordination &amp; guidance on evaluation policies and activities department-wide; funds/directs few if any evaluations</td>
<td>• Officer leads an evaluation-only (or primarily) office; small staff</td>
<td>• Minimal if any dedicated funding for evaluation</td>
<td>• Sub agencies have main responsibility for evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitating Chief Evaluation Officer</strong></td>
<td>• Provides expertise, coordination &amp; guidance on evaluation policies and activities department-wide; funds/directs few if any evaluations</td>
<td>• Office and Officer have evaluation responsibilities but also other related responsibilities (e.g., planning, policymaking, performance, budgeting)</td>
<td>• Minimal if any dedicated funding for evaluation</td>
<td>• Sub agencies have main responsibility for evaluations</td>
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Many agencies and sub-agencies also have learning agendas and evaluation plans.

**Learning agendas** prioritize questions/issues on which there are questions that research and evaluation might address:

- Ideally multi-year
- Ideally multiple dimensions of one or more issues
- Priorities reflect administration, statutory requirements, management and operational issues and needs
- May be public in some form

**Evaluation plans** include expected evaluations and research to address priority questions/issues to be initiated:

- Evaluation plans are annually
- Depending on resources/funding
- Public in some form (e.g., forecast notice, Fed Register, website notice)

Some agencies/subagencies use the terms interchangeably.
DOL Example: Learning Agenda Components

- **Multi-year Learning Agenda**
  - 5-year Agenda developed at subagency level and rolled up to departmental level for the annual evaluation plan
  - Update annually to remain relevant, reprioritize, etc.
  - Voluntary inclusion in sub-agency strategic/performance plans

- **Learning Priorities**: key topics/issues/questions for research or evaluation (~3-5 per subagency/agency), e.g.:
  A. Performance issues (e.g., factors associated with particular outcomes for particular agency or program)
  B. Program operational issues (e.g., impact/effectiveness of particular strategies/services/programs; exploratory studies)
  C. Special initiatives (e.g., effect of new or proposed initiative or program; background analysis)
  D. Evidence-building issues (e.g., cross-agency data sharing, analytic skills, topical briefings, TA/training, data access, data synchronization, methods, coordination)
DOL Example: Evaluation Plan Outline/Categories

- Annual Departmental Level Evaluation Plan specifies studies, evaluations, and evaluation-related activities planned for the coming year and funded mainly by CEO, to address priority questions in the Learning Agenda
  - Includes new evaluations and continuing studies and activities
  - Annual Plan submitted to Congressional committees (required before exercising evaluation set-aside funding)
  - Summary Plan published in public notice (Federal Register); & posted on website

- Outline/Categories in Departmental Evaluation Plan:

  I. **Statistical and Analytic Studies** (e.g., economic/demographic statistical analysis, simulations, evaluability assessments, implementation evaluations, background data analysis)

  II. **Performance Analysis** (e.g., statistical analysis of activity, outputs/outcomes, performance and metrics)

  III. **Basic Evaluations** (e.g., descriptive statistical analysis of program activities, trends, costs, services, performance/organizational assessments)

  IV. **Impact Evaluations** (causal [net] impact studies, experimental or non-experimental, clinical trials)

  V. **Capacity-building Activities** (e.g., logic models, open data principles, learning agendas, methodological skills, data integration/synchronization, evidence-based clearinghouses, research registries/archives, staff seminars, internships, evaluation TA, cross-departmental collaborations)
Lesson: Important to Obtain Stakeholder Input for Evaluation Plans/Agendas

• Internal stakeholders
  ➢ Collaborative effort of program/operational offices and evaluation specialists (webinars, requests for priorities/interests)
  ➢ Field office input (either at initial stage or to review drafts)
  ➢ Agency leadership input

• External stakeholders
  ➢ Congressional committees; OMB offices (retain inquiries)
  ➢ Research/academic community (Request for Information, webinars)
  ➢ Public comment (e.g., Request for Information, or public notice of draft plan in Federal Register)
  ➢ Optional contractor assistance to obtain and compile stakeholder input
Lesson: Include capacity-building in Learning Agendas

- In addition to specific evaluations and specific learning questions, learning agendas should include capacity-building activities, e.g.:
  - Staff development—training
  - Systems capacity development – TA and training for field offices, services providers, evaluators/researchers
  - Data systems improvement—access, sharing
  - Public Use Guidelines
  - Evidence-based clearinghouses, archives, registries
Lesson: Use Learning Agenda to Include Evaluation in Budgeting

- Use Learning Agendas to draft a chapter (or section) in the annual agency budget submission to OMB
- Cite relevant findings from research or evaluation for new budget requests
- Indicate evidence-building in budget narrative when possible
- Consider tiered funding for discretionary grants when possible (e.g., higher grant amounts for scale-up replication of evidence-based strategy; basic grant amount for innovation with rigorous evaluation to test concept or effectiveness)
- Consider budget request for capacity-building as indicated in learning agendas (e.g., clearinghouses, fellowships, staff development, data analytics/sciences)
- Consider creative/flexible funding mechanisms to fund evaluations in learning agenda (e.g., evaluation set asides, pooled/blended funding across agencies and subagencies)
Lesson: Use Learning Agenda in Strategic Plan

- Include an evidence chapter in Strategic Plan
- Align evaluations to strategic priorities
- Include cross agency topics in learning agenda; consider CAPS (cross-agency priorities) and cross-agency evidence-building (e.g., pooled funding, data sharing/data access)
Urban Institute Federal Evaluation Workshop Series

- Facilitates an exchange of information across agencies to share lessons and practices
  - Building evidence
  - Expanding rigorous analysis
  - Using results of evaluations and evidence in decision-making and management
  - Sessions cover issues at different points on the maturity continuum
  - Options to participate via Webinar or phone
Information and Contact

- Demetra Nightingale  dnightingale@urban.org
- Urban Institute web site  https://www.urban.org/
- Evidence Capacity-building page  
  https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/evidence-based-policy-capacity