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Learning Agendas

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What you need to know about learning agendas

- Learning agendas are a set of prioritized research questions and activities that guide an agency's evidence-building and decisionmaking practices.
- Several federal agencies have already developed learning agendas that may serve as models for other agencies.
- The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and the President's FY 2019 Budget recommend that agencies develop multiyear learning agendas.

What is a learning agenda?

A learning agenda is a set of activities that includes specifying research questions that guide an agency's research and evaluation projects in both the short and long term. As the Office of Management and Budget has stated, "Government should continually improve program performance by applying existing evidence of what works, generating new knowledge, and using experimentation and innovation to test new approaches to program delivery."¹ Learning agendas can help government achieve these goals.

The evidence-building process consists of four components:²

1. Determine priorities and research questions of interest.
2. Design and initiate analysis, research, and evaluation to answer research questions.
3. Disseminate findings.
4. Use the results to inform program and policy decisions.

Learning agendas address the first component and help guide subsequent steps.

The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking's [final report](#) and the [President's FY 2019 Budget](#) encourage federal agencies to implement learning agendas. Through this effort, "agencies can identify critical questions and the evidence needed to answer these questions, given agency priorities, available resources, and challenges."³ Learning agendas are also a way to identify what is already known, what

¹ "Implementing a Learning Agenda Approach," USAID Learning Lab, accessed October 17, 2017, https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/defining_a_learning_agenda.pdf.

² Demetra Smith Nightingale and Molly M. Scott, "Building Evidence Culture and Capacity in Federal Agencies" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, Forthcoming).

³ "Building and Using Evidence to Improve Government Effectiveness," in "An American Budget: Fiscal Year 2019," US Office of Management and Budget, accessed February 27, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/spec-fy2019.pdf>.

data are available, and where data collection gaps exist. As the Commission writes, “The evidence-building community within a department can in turn use the learning agenda as a coordination tool,” and learning agendas can also help “catalyze targeted evidence-building activities outside the Federal government.”⁴

≡ What are the benefits of a learning agenda?

There are numerous benefits to developing a learning agenda, such as advancing high-quality research and evaluation and building a culture of evidence. The process of devising a learning agenda can help departments

- systematically identify gaps in their knowledge and conduct research and evaluation to fill them;
- organize research and evaluation efforts within budget and program timeframes;
- align research and evaluations with their missions and legal responsibilities;
- coordinate the different types of evaluations and research conducted by various offices;
- create an environment that encourages individuals and offices to learn from their evidence and from others, which can lead to adaptation and innovation;
- foster collaboration and evidence-sharing internally and with other agencies and external stakeholders; and
- reinforce organizational change to more effectively build evidence and conduct high-quality, rigorous research and evaluations.

≡ How is a learning agenda developed?

When identifying priority research questions, it is good practice to engage staff from program, evaluation, performance, and statistical offices across the agency, as well as external stakeholders such as offices in other agencies, state and local administrators, congressional staff, the Office of Management and Budget, and academic researchers.

Steps for identifying priority research questions could include the following:

- Collecting the requests for information that an agency receives from policymakers and other stakeholders.
- Seeking input from all agency teams and divisions, as well as from external stakeholders through public engagement strategies, such as expert convening meetings.

⁴ “The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking,” Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, accessed February 27, 2018, <https://www.cep.gov/content/dam/cep/report/cep-final-report.pdf>.

- Seeking perspectives from state and local programs and grantees.
- Analyzing grantee narrative reports “to identify trends and issues that are important and common to grantees, as well as innovations or topics that may be promising and therefore possible to include in formal demonstrations or evaluations.”⁵

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, for example, convenes an expert work group biannually and publishes its plan in the *Federal Register* to request public comments.

The President’s FY 2019 Budget suggests that an agency’s learning agenda should be informed by a range of key stakeholders, including Administration and agency leadership, policy and program offices, external researchers, and Congressional interests.

≡ What are the key components of learning agendas?

A learning agenda should reflect the agency or department’s statutory requirements, strategic objectives, performance measures, and program goals, as well as the administration’s priorities. It should also reflect the priorities set by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 and any other performance management procedures in effect for a particular agency or program.

Based on a survey of learning agendas at USAID and other federal agencies, USAID has identified several common features:

- *Learning questions*, which are prioritized and often categorized within thematic areas into a formal document.
- *Learning activities*, such as research, evaluation, literature reviews, midcourse stocktaking, portfolio reviews, pause and reflect sessions, and so on.
 - Most **research-based activities** are conducted by academics and evaluation experts using formal qualitative and quantitative research methods.
 - **Practice-based activities** have also been included in learning agendas and may include “experience summits” and other events aimed at sharing “expertise and experience to determine best practices and learning.”⁶
- *Learning products*, such as infographics, two-page summaries of priority issues or topics, webinars, podcasts, and other media aimed at specific audiences.

The formal learning agenda document typically provides a general background to the learning process and the agenda’s objectives. It will also include a methodology section describing how the learning

⁵ Demetra Smith Nightingale and Molly M. Scott, “Building Evidence Culture and Capacity in Federal Agencies” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, Forthcoming).

⁶ USAID, “[Landscape Analysis of Learning Agendas: USAID/Washington and Beyond](#)” (Washington, DC: USAID, 2017).

agenda was constructed, the stakeholders consulted, and the results obtained. The learning questions follow, often subdivided by theme.

The document ranges from a single page to 10 or more pages and recommends one or more potential studies depending on the office or agency, its experience with evaluations and performance, and the resources available for research projects.

Where have learning agendas been used?

Learning agendas have been gaining traction among federal agencies, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Labor.

HUD'S RESEARCH ROADMAP

HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research developed the [HUD Research Roadmap](#) to guide its research priorities and investments. First released in 2013, the roadmap is designed to be refreshed every five years.

For its first research roadmap, which guides the Office of Policy Development and Research's priorities from 2014 to 2018, HUD solicited input from members of the academic community, practitioners, and federal, state, and local policymakers. These conversations helped determine the most pressing research questions that HUD should pursue. HUD recorded nearly 1,000 comments, which were narrowed down into distinct research projects to answer the prioritized research questions.

The Office of Policy Development and Research recently released a 2017 update to the roadmap, which organizes its research and evaluation priorities into focus areas that encompass different aspects of the agency's mission: housing affordability (markets), housing affordability (programs), policy lessons from the Moving to Work expansion, energy and resilience, education, health, mobility, place-based strategies, and crosscutting/other.

In addition to guiding HUD's research projects, the roadmap also helps inform fiscal year budget requests to Congress. Although HUD's research budget will likely not cover all of the projects identified in the roadmap, Congress may endorse certain priorities.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR LEARNING AGENDA

In the past six years, the Department of Labor has [implemented several policies](#) aimed at "institutionalizing a culture of evidence and learning." A key component of its approach has been to develop learning agendas to guide its research priorities and evidence building.

Each of the 15 operating agencies within the Department of Labor is required to create a five-year learning agenda, in collaboration with the chief evaluation officer, which is updated annually. Learning agendas serve as a "catalyst for setting priorities for studies and for conceptualizing studies that need to be done." They also include evaluations that Congress has required of the agencies.

The agendas specify various methodologies that might be used in studies, including rigorous impact evaluation (i.e., experimental randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs), basic statistical analysis or research, implementation analysis, and performance analysis. Some agencies within the department, such as the Employment and Training Administration, align the learning agenda process with a broader research and evaluation plan; the Employment and Training Administration, for example, prepares and publicly releases a five-year plan, with extensive public and stakeholder input into priority study topics.

Learning agendas also help allocate the resources and services of the Chief Evaluation Office. The Secretary of Labor has the authority to devote up to 0.75 percent of operating funds to program evaluation through the Chief Evaluation Office.

After each agency has developed its agenda, the Chief Evaluation Office prepares a department-wide evaluation plan. The plan is subsequently published in the *Federal Register* for feedback from the public and stakeholders. Congress and the Office of Management and Budget are notified of the planned priority studies.⁷

Where can I learn more?

- USAID has done a “[landscape analysis](#)” of where learning agendas and other learning activities exist in the federal government and elsewhere.
- The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking’s final report, [The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking](#), discusses key components of learning agendas and recommends they be implemented by agencies. The report also includes a range of other recommendations related to data sharing, privacy, and federal evidence capacity.
- The New York City Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity uses evidence to make decisions about strategies to reduce poverty and increase equity. In a process similar to developing a learning agenda, [NYC Opportunity](#) engages with city agencies and offices to create a portfolio of rigorous evaluations and research on programs and special initiatives that focus on reducing poverty.

⁷ Demetra Smith Nightingale, “[Making Evidence Relevant to Government: The Role of Evaluators and Researchers](#)” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017).



BROOKINGS



With support from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, researchers from the Urban Institute, Brookings Institution, American Enterprise Institute, and The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative have formed the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative. The Collaborative brings together researchers from organizations across the ideological spectrum to create tools to support evidence-based policymaking at the federal level. The Collaborative's work is assisted by an Advisory Group consisting of stakeholders throughout the evidence-based policymaking field. The opinions expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative or its funder.

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