



Building Evidence Culture and Capacity in Federal Agencies

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Policymakers are increasingly interested in using data and evaluations to improve the results of federal programs. In 2016, Congress created the bipartisan Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, charged with developing recommendations to support analysis, research, and evaluation of government programs. The Commission's 2017 report included recommendations in three areas: improving access to data, strengthening privacy protections, and improving agency evidence-building capacity in federal agencies.

This brief focuses on the third priority: building evidence capacity that aligns with the commission's recommendations. Suggestions are presented for how federal agencies can establish, strengthen, and sustain evidence-building strategies for program evaluations and other types of evidence.

Policy Context

Policymakers and administrators in many federal agencies are increasingly interested in how they can best ensure the quality and value of federal programs and services. Congressional establishment of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking is part of the growing interest. The commission's report, released in September 2017, included 22 recommendations for improving access to data, strengthening privacy protections, and improving agency evidence-building capacity.

In addition to the commission report, the White House budget documents presenting the administration's proposals and priorities for fiscal year 2018 and fiscal year 2019 included chapters on

evidence. The 2019 budget is subtitled “Efficient, Effective, Accountable”—terms that underlie evidence-based policymaking.

The commission’s recommendations and the White House budget documents are motivating some agencies to strengthen their existing evidence capacity and others to take the first steps in this direction. There is no single process to follow to accomplish these goals, though. Every federal agency has its own reality in experience with and resources for research, evaluation, and analysis; institutional culture regarding evidence; and staff analytical skills and capacity. Some agencies have a long history of sponsoring and using evaluations and dedicated funding to do so; other agencies have only minimal analytic experience and few resources. The recommendations in this brief focus mainly on practical, low- or no-cost ideas that agencies, including those just starting out or having little or no dedicated funding, can implement.

The next sections briefly summarize some general definitions and concepts of evidence-based policy and present strategies for establishing, strengthening, and sustaining evidence-building activities.

Definitions and Concepts

Having a culture of evidence means using the results of high-quality research, analysis, and evaluations to make program and agency decisions. Federal agencies and programs are first and foremost governed by their missions, statutory authority, and appropriation levels and provisions, meaning that programmatic and operational responsibilities and resources are paramount. There is increasing recognition, however, that using evidence can help agencies target resources efficiently, improve performance and outcomes, and identify the best ways to structure operations and service delivery to maximize results.

Evidence-Based Policy Vision

In addition to the commission’s report in 2017, the chapters on evidence in the White House *Analytical Perspectives* for fiscal years 2018 and 2019 have added momentum to the evidence-based policy agenda (OMB 2017, 2018b). The two latest budget documents expand on the evidence sections that have been included in White House budget documents since 2010. The *Analytical Perspectives* for fiscal year (FY) 2019 affirms support for the commission’s recommendations and a commitment to improve and strengthen the federal “evidence infrastructure” necessary to build a culture of evidence that includes

hiring and deploying trained staff; ensuring independence and rigor in statistics and evaluations; using cost-effective, cutting-edge methods; ... bringing evidence to bear in policy and program decisions; [and]... making better use of existing administrative data by ensuring that there are processes and tools in place to use and share data in appropriate and secure ways.
(OMB 2018b, 59)

The FY 2019 budget also refers to and affirms these principles and vision, and it directs agencies to establish regular and routine systems to collect, analyze, and use evidence in decisionmaking:

The Administration is committed to a vision for results-driven government that improves mission delivery and directs taxpayer dollars to the most effective and efficient purposes. Achieving this vision means ensuring accountability for results, having the necessary analytical tools, identifying and investing in effective practices, and accessing and using data to transform it into evidence that informs action. With stronger evidence, we can learn from and improve programs to better serve the American people...Multiple forms of evidence—including evaluations, program monitoring, performance measurement, statistics, and other forms of research and analysis—can inform decision-making. (OMB 2018b, 59)

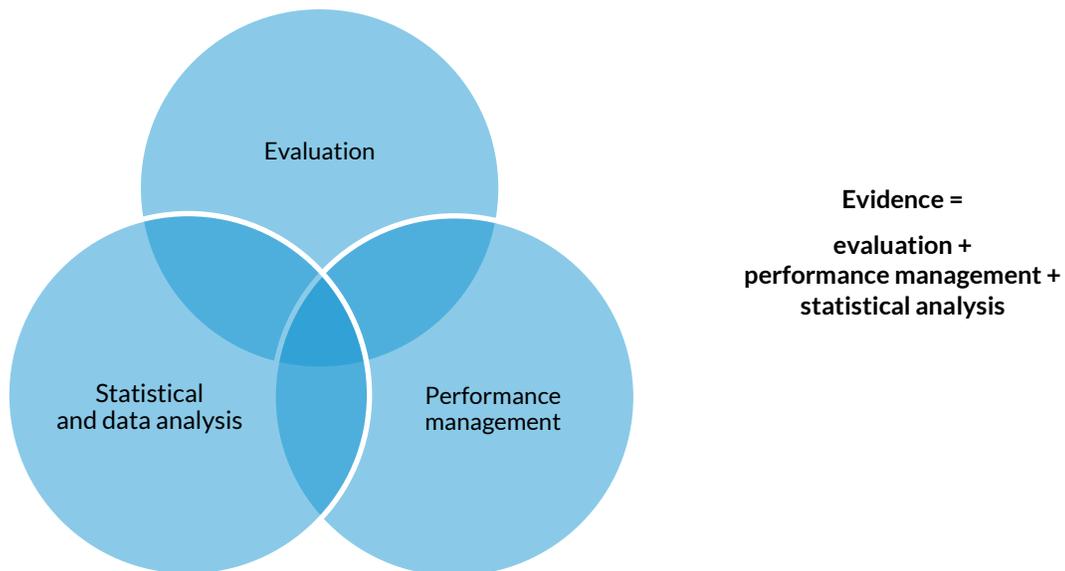
Types of Evidence

Various types of evidence are important and useful, and each has its unique purposes, professional standards, and statutory or regulatory context. They also overlap in some ways, particularly in what they might be used to measure, the topics or issues on which they focus, and the analytic methods applied. Each also uses diverse sources such as program administrative data, statistical agency data series, surveys, structured interviews, or document reviews.

The different categories of evidence interact to form the knowledge base from which decisions can be made (figure 1). Each category of evidence has specific and unique activities, but they overlap and complement each other in important ways, particularly in the types of data used.

FIGURE 1

Different Categories of Evidence Interact to Form a Knowledge Base for Decisionmaking



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The FY 2018 and 2019 budget documents also emphasize the importance of having various types of evidence to make decisions and improve results.

- **Performance management** activities mainly use performance metrics, based on program administrative data, to track progress toward established performance goals, as required by the Government Performance and Results Act (or GPRA) Modernization Act (GPRAMA) guidelines, or to monitor federal grants.
- **Evaluation** includes a range of designs, particularly to determine outcomes and impacts of policies and programs, using a combination of administrative data and data collection developed specifically for an evaluation. Evaluation and research offices also initiate a variety of studies such as statistical analyses, implementation evaluations, and formal rigorous causal impact evaluations. In some cases, these may address performance management issues such as defining or validating measures, or analyzing factors associated with grantee or program outcomes.
- **Statistical and data analysis** may use administrative data, but it more often involves analyzing survey, census, and other large data bases produced and maintained by federal statistical agencies and elsewhere. Statistical analysis provides information and evidence on economic, demographic, business, and other trends, and allows basic research to explore theories and test new ideas.

The terms “program evaluation” and “program monitoring” or “performance management” are sometimes used and understood differently across programs and agencies. In the academic and research community, “evaluation” is a research activity and “monitoring” is a separate management activity. Some federal agencies, mainly those with responsibility for international activities, use “monitoring and evaluation” (or “M&E”) to refer to grant or program monitoring and performance management, but often not program evaluation as defined above.

The evaluation policy of the US Agency for International Development (USAID 2016) includes a very useful set of definitions that explain the distinctions among evaluation, monitoring, and performance activities (reproduced in box 1).

BOX 1

Concepts and Consistent Terminology

“To ensure consistency in the use of key concepts, the terms and classifications highlighted below will be used by USAID staff and those engaged in USAID evaluations.

Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of information about the characteristics and outcomes of strategies, projects, and activities as a basis for judgments to improve effectiveness, and timed to inform decisions about current and future programming. Evaluation is distinct from assessment or an informal review of projects.

- Impact evaluations measure the change in a development outcome that is attributable to a defined intervention; impact evaluations are based on models of cause and effect and require a credible and rigorously defined counterfactual to control for factors other than the intervention that might account for the observed change. Impact evaluations in which comparisons are made between beneficiaries that are randomly assigned to either a treatment or a control group provide the strongest evidence of a relationship between the intervention under study and the outcome measured.
- Performance evaluations encompass a broad range of evaluation methods. They often incorporate before-after comparisons, but generally lack a rigorously defined counterfactual. Performance evaluations may address descriptive, normative, and/or cause-and-effect questions: what a particular project or program has achieved (at any point during or after implementation); how it is being implemented; how it is perceived and valued; whether expected results are occurring; and other questions that are pertinent to design, management, and operational decision-making.
- Performance monitoring is the ongoing and systematic collection of performance indicator data and other quantitative or qualitative information to reveal whether implementation is on track and whether expected results are being achieved. Performance monitoring includes monitoring of outputs and project and strategic outcomes.
- Performance indicators measure expected outputs and outcomes of strategies, projects, or activities based on a mission’s Results Framework or a project’s or activity’s logic model. In general, outputs are directly attributable to the program activities, while project outcomes represent results to which a given program contributes but for which it is not solely responsible.
- Performance management is the systematic process of planning, collecting, analyzing, and using performance monitoring data and evaluations to track progress, influence decision-making, and improve results. Performance management is one aspect of the larger process of continuous learning and adaptive management.

Note: In referring to projects throughout the document, the term is used to mean a set of complementary activities, over an established timeline and budget, intended to achieve a discrete development result. The term project does not refer only or primarily to an implementing mechanism, such as a contract or grant.”

Source: US Agency for International Development *Evaluation: Learning from Experience* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2016), 3.

Evidence Culture

Organizational culture is a somewhat abstract concept that generally refers to shared beliefs, viewpoints, or norms that reflect and define how procedures and activities are carried out. The FY 2018 budget included a discussion of “evidence culture” in terms of evidence and using information for continuous learning and effectiveness:

With a strong evidence infrastructure and culture agencies constantly (1) ask and answer questions that help them find, implement, and sustain effective programs and practices, (2) identify and improve or eliminate ineffective programs and practices, (3) test promising programs and practices to see if they are effective and can be replicated, and (4) find lower cost ways to achieve better results. (OMB 2017, 55)

Thus, from a functional perspective, an agency can establish a culture of evidence by carrying out activities that support, produce, and use evidence and by integrating it into agency procedures and operations.

Evidence Capacity

Agencies can develop the capacity to support a culture of evidence by establishing functional and procedural activities related to research, analysis, and evaluation. The evidence chapter in the White House 2019 budget, like the previous five years’ budget documents, encourages agencies to adopt institutional, or infrastructural, strategies to improve their evidence activities. More specifically, agencies are urged to

- adhere to “evaluation principles and practices... [that] include rigor, relevance, independence, transparency and ethics”;
- have “designated evaluation officials and offices”;
- develop “multiyear learning agendas” to plan and focus evidence-building activities and priorities;
- strengthen “interagency coordination” to build and use evidence;
- leverage available “funding flexibilities and set-asides”;
- “improv[e] data access and governance for evidence-building” by investing in improving the quality and appropriate integration of data that can be used for evaluation, research, and program management; and
- “us[e] evidence to learn and improve” (OMB 2018b, 60–63).

Federal agencies and programs that allocate funds to states, communities, and other grantees can also build a culture of evidence with these partners. Of course, state and local governments have their own data, reporting, and management information systems; but if they receive any federal funds, they must also submit regular reports on how they use those funds. Federal agencies, therefore, can promote a culture of evidence through the types of reporting they require of grantees.

Thus, there are many opportunities to begin to establish a culture of evaluation and evidence, and to build and strengthen agency capacity to carry out evaluation and evidence activities that can better support agencies' critical operational work.

Evaluation Policy Statement

Having a policy that states an agency's approach and principles regarding research and evaluation helps establish an understanding about evaluations and resulting reports and findings. Adhering to professional guidelines and standards, many federal agencies now have evaluation policies or statements that specify principles for ensuring high-quality research and evaluation activities.

The research profession has established standards for designing and conducting studies and disseminating results. Professional associations, such as the American Evaluation Association, and academic disciplines including economics, sociology, engineering, medicine, psychology, and public policy, also have established guidelines, theories, and methodologies for standards of high-quality research. Other bodies, such as the National Academy of Sciences, also have guidelines for federal statistical agencies and evaluation offices, and the Government Accountability Office has guidelines for federal audit and monitoring activities. Guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in January 2018 presented guidelines for federal foreign assistance agencies that are also appropriate for all agencies.

These professional standards and guidelines form the basis for many agencies' evaluation policy statements.

Box 2 presents examples from agencies with formal evaluation policy statements. These statements share five critical principles:

- **Rigor:** using the highest quality study designs, methodologies, analyses, and reports
- **Relevance:** addressing issues, questions, and topics of high interest to the agency, program, stakeholders, Congress, and the current administration; and producing results that can be used to help inform improvement in programs, services, outcomes and impacts
- **Transparency:** making studies and reports available within agencies and to the public
- **Independence:** ensuring objective and unbiased studies and researchers
- **Ethics:** following professional research and evaluation standards; protecting privacy and confidentiality of study participants and human subjects

BOX 2

Examples of Federal Agency Evaluation Principles

Small Business Administration (SBA)

- *Ethics*—Conduct the evaluation by adhering to the rules governing human rights, confidentiality, and privacy. Minimize the burden to research participants and cost to taxpayers.
- *Independence*—Conduct the evaluation through an outside party that does not have vested interest in the outcome or will not interpret the results in ways that are self-serving or misleading. Eliminate the appearance of bias to ensure results are properly used.
- *Rigor*—Employ the methodological approaches that best support the definitive answers to the evaluation questions under investigation
- *Relevance*—Scope and select evaluation questions most closely tied to the goals of the program, the priorities of the Agency, and the intended use by senior leaders.
- *Transparency*—Ensure that the evaluation, scope, design, implementation, and results are available for internal and public review, assessment, and critique.

US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (HHS-ACF)

- *Rigor*—using the most rigorous methods that are appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within budget and other constraints.
- *Relevance*—Evaluation priorities should take into account legislative requirements and Congressional interests and should reflect the interests and needs of ACF, HHS, and Administration leadership; program office staff and leadership; ACF partners such as states, territories, tribes, and local grantees; the populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders. Evaluations should be designed to represent the diverse populations that ACF programs serve, and encourage diversity among those carrying out the work.
- *Transparency*—Make information about planned and ongoing evaluations easily accessible. Release results in a timely manner regardless of the findings. Evaluation reports will describe the methods used, strengths and weaknesses, and the generalizability of findings. Evaluation reports will present comprehensive results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings.
- *Independence*—Insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. To promote objectivity, ACF protects independence in the design, conduct and analysis of evaluations. Evaluations are conducted through the competitive award of grants and contracts to external experts who are free from conflicts of interest. The director of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation reports directly to the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families; has authority to approve the design of evaluation projects and analysis plans; and has authority to approve, release and disseminate evaluation reports.
- *Ethics*—Evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants. ACF-sponsored evaluations will comply with both the spirit and the letter of relevant requirements such as regulations governing research involving human subjects.

US Agency for International Development (USAID)

Evaluations should be

- Integrated into design of projects, strategies, and activities.
- Unbiased in measurement and reporting.
- Relevant to future decisions.
- Oriented toward reinforcing local ownership, consistent with institutional aims of local ownership through respectful engagement with all partners, including local beneficiaries and stakeholders, while leveraging and building local evaluation capacity.
- *Transparent*—shared widely with commitment to full and active disclosure.

US Department of Labor (DOL)

- *Rigor*—Use the most rigorous methods appropriate and feasible within statutory, budget, and other constraints. Evaluation staff are skilled in the methods.
- *Relevance*—Evaluation priorities take into account legislative requirements and the interests and needs of leadership, specific agencies, and programs; program office staff and leadership; states, territories, tribes, grantees, populations served, researchers, and other stakeholders.
- *Transparency*—Information about evaluations and findings from evaluations are available and accessible. Release in a timely manner results of all evaluations that are not specifically focused on internal management, legal, or enforcement procedures or that are not otherwise prohibited from disclosure. Make evaluation data available as public use for secondary analysis, with appropriate privacy and data security.
- *Independence*—Insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. After technical peer review, the Chief Evaluation Officer has authority to approve, release, and disseminate evaluation reports.
- *Ethics*—Evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants and human subjects, complying with both the spirit and the letter of relevant laws and regulations.

Establishing an official policy or principles statement usually requires agency leadership agreement or sign-off, which may involve considerable time and effort. The effort pays off, though, since the policy institutionalizes the principles and supports continuous understanding and adherence to the processes followed to conduct evaluations. Including an agencywide evaluation policy statement on all applicable websites reinforces that the principles apply to all the agency's evaluations and research.

Agencies that do not yet have formal policy statements can nonetheless incorporate some of or all the key principles in activities or procedures to improve how studies are conducted and reports are disseminated, along with the credibility of the findings. Understanding the key principles and incorporating procedures to the extent possible into activities are described in the next sections.

Building Evidence Capacity

Many federal agencies have evidence-building processes that involve developing and using structured approaches to setting priorities for research, evaluation, and analysis. Many others are just beginning to think about how to develop an appropriate evaluation process.

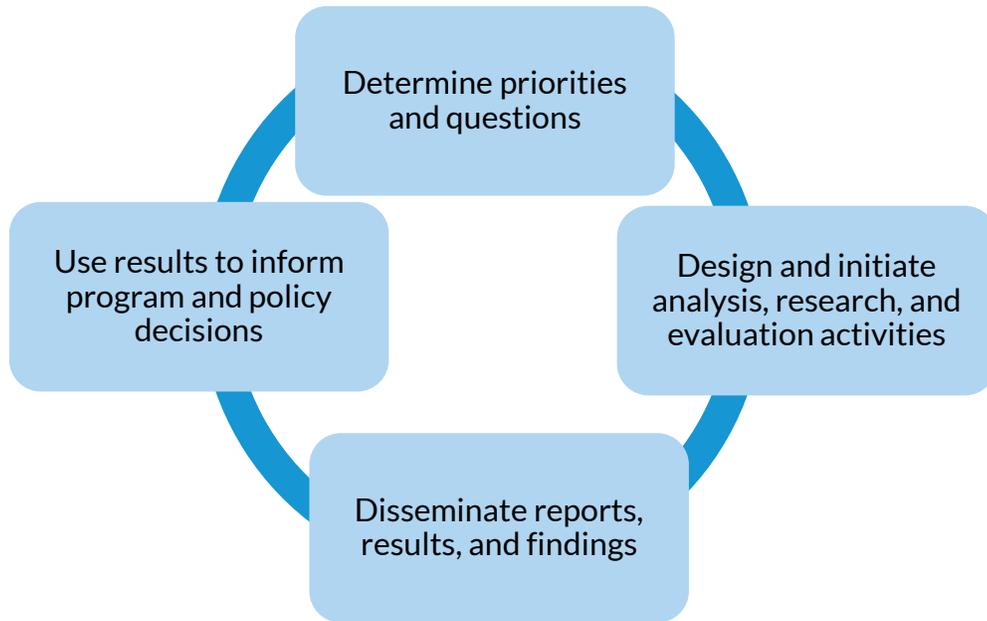
This section discusses strategies, mainly related to program evaluation and performance management, that can be used at the departmental (agency) level and at the subagency level to build or strengthen an understanding or culture of evidence. Building a culture of evidence often is driven by department or cabinet leadership and statutory provisions. However, efforts to build or strengthen a culture of evidence can also occur within a single office or subagency. Throughout this brief, the term “federal agencies” is used generically to include both departmental and subagency staff charged with building evidence.

At the departmental level, many agencywide infrastructures or processes around performance management have been instituted to comply with the GPRAMA. Subagencies, and often divisions or offices within them, may also have performance management and evaluation responsibilities. Federal agencies vary significantly in their internal procedures around collecting, monitoring, and reporting data; developing and tracking performance metrics; and designing and executing program evaluations. Some federal agency staff have considerable statistical and technical skills, and others have important program knowledge needed to design and interpret performance measures. Each division and unit focuses, appropriately, on its programs or procedural responsibilities, with few established mechanisms for sharing and communication across divisions or across programs around common short- and long-term goals or priorities.

Drawing from the definitions discussed above and in the federal budget documents, the evidence-building process consists of four components of activities (figure 2):

FIGURE 2

Evidence-Based Culture Can Be Infused into Decisionmaking Using a Multistep, Iterative Process



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The visual above aligns with strategies noted in the White House budget chapters on evidence, allowing federal agencies to adopt activities that could also strengthen their own approaches to performance management, research, and evaluation and are feasible given their resources, expertise, and mission.

In the next sections, strategies are presented for federal agencies that could improve and strengthen components of the evidence-building process, beginning with establishing and using agreed upon guiding principles. Some strategies could be initiated quickly, with little or no additional costs or resources, and others would require resources or more planning or development.

Developing Learning Agendas/Evaluation Plans

The Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission (2017) calls for agencies to develop evaluation plans and learning agendas to help identify and prioritize studies that should be initiated.

Learning agendas, or evaluation plans, can be the basis for a strategic approach to planning the types of research and evaluations that should be initiated, including rigorous empirical research about “what works” and what works “best.” While their purpose is to systematically plan evaluation activities, learning agendas can also include research and analysis relevant to a range of other evidence activities, including statistical analysis of trends and of program performance. Learning agendas are meant as a complement to the strong performance management required under GPRA and generally mainly include the program evaluation and statistical analysis described in figure 1.

PREPARE DEPARTMENTAL OR SUBAGENCY PLANS

A learning agenda or evaluation plan may apply to a department or to agencies or offices within a department, particularly in large departments. This will depend on the organizational structure adopted for the evaluation activities. There is no single model for learning agendas. For example, some departments may have a central evaluation office responsible for initiating, funding, and directing evaluations as well as coordinating or providing guidance on evaluation activities throughout the department. Others (particularly large departments) may have a departmental evaluation unit that provides guidance and coordination but does not fund or initiate evaluations; subagency offices or divisions may have those responsibilities. If the department does not have a central evaluation office or officer, subagencies may nonetheless develop learning agendas of their own. Several examples of varied approaches are listed below.

- **US Agency for International Development (USAID).** USAID has more than 60 program and country missions, each of which must have an evaluation plan, using resources and materials developed by the USAID Bureau of Policy Planning and Research, Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research.
- **Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).** FNS, a large agency in the Department of Agriculture, prepares a research and evaluation plan each fiscal year, collaborating with other department agencies as relevant on cross-cutting studies.
- **Administration for Children and Families (ACF).** ACF, a large agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, has an agency evaluation plan, with input from all its operational program units.
- **Department of Transportation (DOT).** Research plans are statutorily required of each modal operating administration, all of which participate in a monthly planning coordination meeting convened by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology, Research Development and Technology Office.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).** CDC's national centers, divisions, and large programs each have evaluation plans, with cross-unit coordination as appropriate in collaboration with the chief evaluation office.
- **Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).** The HUD Research Roadmap is the departmental-level evaluation and research plan, prepared by the Office of Policy Development and Research.
- **Small Business Administration (SBA).** The SBA learning agenda is prepared in conjunction with the development of the agencywide annual strategic plan, coordinated by the program evaluation team in the Office of Performance Management.
- **Department of Labor (DOL).** Each operating agency prepares a learning agenda, and the chief evaluation office compiles them in an annual department evaluation plan; some large subagencies, such as the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), also have formal evaluation plans in addition to the learning agenda.

An important point is that the learning agenda should reflect priorities and interest of the agency to maximize the usefulness and relevance of the resulting study and to begin the participatory role the agency may play in the study (e.g., helping access data, reviewing data collection instruments and surveys, notifying states or field offices of the new study).

Learning agendas, or evaluation plans, range from one page to ten or more. A learning agenda can include one or more potential studies, depending on office or agency and staff experience with evaluations and performance management, and the amount of resources available for research projects. Box 3 presents a sample of the general types of guiding principles and categories of studies that agencies might include in a learning agenda.

BOX 3

Sample Learning Agenda Outline

Guiding Principles

- Prioritize studies that focus on measuring the effectiveness of key program outputs, outcomes, and impacts, consistent with agency priorities, performance objectives, and Congressional requirements.
 - Encourage the most rigorous evaluation designs possible to address the evaluation question of interest (often experimental designs), in a manner that is realistic given the programmatic missions/goals, programmatic maturity, programmatic context, data availability, and analytic capability.
 - Expand the use of data, evidence, and evaluation findings by supporting studies that build knowledge about and capacity to use rigorous evaluation designs and methods, and supporting the development and use of high-quality data in evaluations and other sources across the department.
- I. **Priorities:** Top priority learning topics/issues for evaluations/research [*list 3–4 current priorities*]
 - a. Performance issues: [*example: What factors are associated with a particular performance outcome measure?*]
 - b. Program operational issues: [*example: What is the effectiveness or impact of a particular program or service strategy?*]
 - c. Priority policies/initiatives: [*example: What is the likely effect of a new initiative or administration proposal?*]
 - II. **Outcomes/Impacts.** Planned outcome/impact evaluations [*list potential studies using experimental, nonexperimental, or other rigorous designs; efficacy, effectiveness, or replication studies*]
 - III. **Performance.** Planned performance/continuous improvement evaluations/research [*list potential studies, e.g., rapid response studies of procedural or administrative changes; statistical analysis of performance trends; analysis of potential new performance metrics*]
 - IV. **Exploratory.** Planned exploratory/background evaluations/research [*list potential studies, e.g., literature reviews; evaluability assessments; feasibility/design studies; data and statistical analysis*]
 - V. **Capacity-building.** Planned evaluation-related capacity building activities [*list potential activities, e.g., university academic research centers; evidence-based clearinghouse maintenance; community-of practice network; data access and exchange improvements; Evaluation 101 seminars; grantee/state evaluation technical assistance; evaluation seminars/conferences*]
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OBTAIN PROGRAM AND STAKEHOLDER INPUT

The *process* of developing learning agendas or evaluation plans is as important as the resulting documents.

Engaging staff and administrators from operational program and agencies in developing evaluation plans helps make subsequent studies as relevant and useful as possible. If the department or agency has regional, state, or local offices, programs, or grantees, it is also important to engage their administrators and staff in developing the plan. Administrators of state and local programs, or federal program grantees, can be encouraged to launch their own learning agenda process, defining their own goals and the parameters of research and evaluation that might be conducted under their auspices or in coordination with the federal agency.

For an agency just beginning to develop a learning agenda, a first step would be to involve subagencies and offices in identifying priority research questions. Evaluation specialists in the evaluation office could convene a roundtable discussion with staff of operating agencies to discuss evaluation and priorities; hold regular (e.g., quarterly) community of practice meetings, or meet separately with each agency to identify one or two possible studies of interest to include in a learning agenda. Agencies can also cull the inquiries received from Congress or other stakeholders to help priorities useful studies that will allow answering policy-relevant questions.

Other stakeholders should also have input into learning agendas—for example, representatives from associations, academia and other researchers, businesses, or advocacy groups. This can be done in various ways, such as publishing a draft plan in the *Federal Register*, holding conference calls to obtain ideas about priority research topics, or having webinars for interested stakeholders. The ACF's Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS-ACF-OPRE) convenes an expert work group biannually and publishes its plan in the *Federal Register* to request public comments. The ETA's Office of Policy Development and Research in the Department of Labor (DOL-ETA-OPDR) engages a university research institute to convene work groups and interview key stakeholders, including researchers and evaluators, to obtain their input into the plan.

ALLOW FOR FLEXIBILITY AND REVISIONS OF LEARNING AGENDAS

Learning agendas lay out the best plans at a given time, based on strategic input from program, agency, and other stakeholders. However, it is important to allow the evaluation plans or learning agendas to be revised and updated to meet emerging needs. Some federal agencies consider their learning agendas “working” documents, especially if their agendas cover more than one year. Situations may arise or changes may occur that require the plan to be modified. For example, policy or program priorities may shift, new laws may be enacted, or appropriated funds may change.

Detailed agency learning agendas, therefore, may remain as working documents and used internally. Summary evaluation plans or “forecasts” of possible studies, at the departmental or subagency level, may be made public on agency web sites or in the *Federal Register*, or as Notices to Congress, which are sometimes required by statute.

Initiating Evaluation and Research Projects

Once topics, questions, and priorities are identified and included in a learning agenda or evaluation plan, studies can be designed and a plan adopted to initiate and manage studies to address the questions. Some projects in the learning agenda could be carried out by federal staff with statistical skills (e.g., exploratory studies, analysis of performance data trends and patterns, statistical analysis). More often, particularly for large formal evaluations, agencies engage outside independent researchers to conduct research and evaluation projects.

The types of possible projects are wide-ranging, from background statistical analysis to analysis to inform or refine performance measures, to field-based implementation or case studies, to formal rigorous experimental causal impact evaluations. Having quality data necessary for evaluations or analysis is a critical factor. Some study items in a learning agenda might use existing administrative data that has already been verified as accurate. Other study items might focus on assessing the quality and accessibility of administrative data, and the costs of collecting additional data if administrative data are not adequate to lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis.

Large formal research and evaluation projects require planning and, often, considerable time (e.g., developing research questions and a preliminary design, developing a grant announcement or a request for proposals, reviewing and awarding grants or contracts). To position itself nimbly to initiate research and evaluations efficiently, an agency could consider institutionalizing strategies that can facilitate the project. For example, many evaluations are conducted as part of discretionary grant programs, where grantees that will be participating in a given program, pilot, demonstration, or service may be included in an evaluation. Including an evaluation provision in all discretionary grant funding opportunity announcements can help reinforce the importance of evaluation and evidence. If a formal evaluation is planned or anticipated (e.g., is in the learning agenda topics), that should be communicated in the announcement. Even if there is not a current plan to evaluate the program, it is good practice to include standard evaluation language. For example, a standard evaluation provision used by DOL is as follows:

As a condition of grant award, ... grantees may be required to participate in a national evaluation. The national evaluation may include an implementation assessment across grantees, an impact and/or outcomes analysis of all or selected sites within or across grantees, and a benefit/cost analysis or assessment of return on investment. Conducting an impact analysis could involve random assignment (which involves random assignment of eligible participants into a treatment group that would receive program services or enhanced program services, or into control group(s) that would receive no program services or program services that are not enhanced). We may require applicants to collect data elements to aid any evaluation. By accepting a... grant award, grantees must agree, if an evaluation is planned, to: (1) make records on participants, employers, and funding available; (2) provide access to program operating personnel, participants, and operational and financial records, and any other pertaining documents to calculate program costs and benefits; and (3) facilitate the assignment by lottery of participants to program services (including the possible increased recruitment of potential participants); and (4) follow evaluation procedures as specified by the national evaluator under the direction of DOL including after the grant period of performance.¹

While most staff with research and evaluation responsibilities have some relevant education or training, there are some low-cost ways agencies can consider to strengthen evaluation teams:

- Allow a specific amount of time (e.g., three days a year) for each staff person with evaluation responsibilities to attend training or professional development related to performance management or evaluation skills and knowledge.
- Sponsor seminars and workshops on evaluations, such as an evaluation 101 session covering basic evaluation methods. Staff in other agencies or subagencies could be encouraged to attend. Some existing agency staff have had graduate course work in evaluation and would benefit from higher-level, more technical workshops.
- Encourage evaluation staff to attend outside workshops, such as those hosted by OMB and the Interagency Council on Evaluation Policy, or outside research institutions. There are also free data analytics and administrative data courses for federal staff (e.g., University of Maryland/NYU/Census course).
- Offer staff to serve on evaluation or analysis grant and contract review panels in other agencies or subagencies, which would allow them to gain more experience or update their knowledge.
- Hold webinars on evidence and evidence-building activities for federal field offices or grantees. Include segments on evaluation quality guidelines, steps for selecting an evaluator, and opportunities for using results. Make the materials available and accessible for future use and review (e.g., with resource links on a research page in the agency website).

Leveraging Resources for Evaluations

Several agencies have funding for research and evaluation. For example, some have evaluation set-aside authority where a specific percentage of a department or subagency's funding (e.g., USDA-Food and Nutrition Service, DOL Chief Evaluation Office) or a program's funding (e.g., Public Health Service, Elementary and Secondary Education programs) can be devoted to these purposes. Other agencies also have appropriated funds for evaluation and research (e.g., Department of Defense Research, Development, Testing and Evaluation; National Institute of Justice; Housing and Urban Development Research and Technology.)

If there is no dedicated funding for evaluation and research, agencies nonetheless have some options for expanding their use of evaluations:

- Leverage nonfederal free analytic or technical staff resources (e.g., summer analytic, research, or information technology interns paid by universities or foundations; foundation-funded research fellows on detail to a federal agency).
- Collaborate with the General Services Administration's Office of Evaluation Sciences on behavioral insights testing.
- Cosponsor or cofund evaluations with other federal agencies.

Disseminating Reports, Results, and Findings

Disseminating the results of research and evaluation projects is an essential component of quality evidence-building policies and practices. This includes having clear policies in place to share research and evaluation reports, making available public-use data files from research studies, and providing access to performance management or monitoring data. As noted earlier, many agencies already have these policies in place, with a commitment to release all reports. Open and timely release of evaluation and research reports is critical to ensuring the usefulness of the reports and helps reinforce their credibility and independence.

The basic dissemination approach is to publish reports from completed studies online. Nearly every federal agency publishes its final research reports this way. Including a short abstract and keywords that can be searchable also makes the information more accessible. Some agencies, like ACF-OPRE, also have regular (monthly or quarterly) research newsletters that list recently completed reports; others have electronic communications, such as the Institute of Education Sciences' e-mail News Flash to which individuals can subscribe for updates.

An evidence-based clearinghouse is a more technically sophisticated and expensive dissemination strategy for evaluation studies, including federally sponsored studies and studies by others in the field, regardless of funding source. A clearinghouse typically requires dedicated staff and (usually) contractor support to develop and maintain. Some of the more advanced clearinghouses include structured evidence reviews and ratings that indicate the quality of the methodology of each study, including whether studies meet certain standards and have positive causal impact findings. ACF's Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness² and the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse³ are examples of technically sophisticated clearinghouses. Other clearinghouses are more oriented toward practitioners, to share research results and present the information in a way that administrators and staff can learn or use for their own programs. Examples of practitioner-oriented clearinghouses are ACF's Self Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse⁴ and DOL-ETA's Workforce System Strategies.⁵ Evidence-rating clearinghouses and practitioner-focused clearinghouses are both useful.

Using Results and Findings

Data and evidence are only valuable to the extent that an agency and its stakeholders use the results to manage and improve performance, and to design, plan, and implement programs and policies. Agencies can take several steps to start using the data they collect from performance management and evaluation.

USE DATA, EVALUATIONS, AND GPRA PROCESS TO IMPROVE RESULTS

To comply with GPRA, all federal agencies hold quarterly review meetings to discuss data on quarterly and annual performance goals. Many federal agencies also meet with partner agencies to review cross-agency priorities. Within some agencies, individual subagencies have their own performance measures and processes beyond the GPRA requirements. If there is also a learning agenda process (e.g., at DOL), the quarterly GPRA reviews could also address progress on learning priorities and ongoing lessons

learned from research and evaluation. Evaluation results can fit into the GPRA meetings because the purpose of the reviews is to help inform action to strengthen continuous improvement, not just to track performance metrics.

USE EVIDENCE TO REINFORCE PRIORITIES AND BUDGET REQUESTS

When a strong body of evidence has accumulated on a topic (e.g., the impact or effectiveness of a strategy, model, program, tool, or process), the collective findings could be used to inform program and policy decisions. For example, research or evaluation findings may lead to reasonable operational or management steps to refine reporting forms and procedures, clarify performance measures, or improve performance. Evaluation findings may also suggest additional research or analysis, or demonstrations of innovative strategies with initial indications of effectiveness. OMB has indicated that budget requests that are evidence based will be more favorably received than requests devoid of evidence. Effective agencies include performance data and trends in each section of the budget document, and relate new request to specific data and evidence. Requests for appropriations to support research or new programs can be structured similarly.

One must be cautious, however, to avoid making decisions based on one study alone or on studies using lower quality methods and analyses. There is a natural desire to take quick action based on a study's findings, but it is important to be prudent, continue to build the base of evidence by using findings to inform the next cycle of the learning agenda, and be cautious in drawing implications too soon. This tendency can be minimized by including key stakeholders in the development of the learning agenda and in study design deliberations. Early involvement can reinforce the importance of building a "portfolio" of evidence as described in the FY 2018 and FY 2019 budget evidence chapters.

Summary

Federal agencies are well-positioned to expand their focus on evidence-based policies being encouraged by OMB, Congress, and the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. One important step to build evidence capacity is to plan and implement learning agendas that complement agencies' efforts to strengthen their performance management and achieve priority objectives. This can be accomplished, even in agencies with very limited resources, by taking the kinds of small, low- and no-cost steps outlined in this brief.

Engaging thoughtfully in this process can improve the quality and accessibility of administrative data, strengthen agencies' existing performance measurement systems, and gradually build a portfolio of evidence to support organizational cultures of continuous improvement.

Notes

- ¹ US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “[Notice of Availability of Funds and Funding Opportunity Announcement](#),” funding opportunity number FOA-ETA-17-03, p. 64.
- ² The project’s home page is <https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/Default.aspx>.
- ³ The clearinghouse’s home page is <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.
- ⁴ The clearinghouse’s home page is <https://www.opressrc.org/>.
- ⁵ The clearinghouse’s home page is <https://strategies.workforcegps.org/>.

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