POLICY BRIEF

Engaging Stakeholders in Learning Agenda Development

A Playbook for Federal Agencies

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Executive Summary

A **learning agenda** is a federal agency's or subagency's plan for identifying and prioritizing learning questions and activities, such as evaluation, data analysis, and other forms of research. Support for learning agendas has emerged in federal policy: the White House Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) 2018 Strategic Review Guidance and the president's reform and reorganization plan both recommend that agencies develop and use learning agendas.

This brief focuses on a critical, early step in the learning agenda process: **stakeholder engagement**. The insights in this brief are informed by qualitative, semistructured interviews with 14 current and former staff members from eight federal agencies. We describe the varying approaches agencies have used to engage with stakeholders to identify and prioritize research questions and to disseminate and update learning agendas. These stakeholders fit three broad categories:

- **Internal stakeholders**, including program offices and agency leadership
- **External nongovernmental audiences**, including researchers and practitioners
- **Governmental stakeholders beyond the agency,** such as OMB and Congress

Key Findings

Internal Engagement Process

- **Learning agendas are typically developed by offices responsible for research, evaluation, and sometimes performance improvement,** but they have been developed at varying levels of federal agencies and by a wide range of offices.
- Agencies have taken several approaches to engaging with and gaining buy-in from staff in program offices, including **individual meetings, group discussions, surveys, and internal advisory groups**.
- **Staff in local, regional, and international field offices can provide a nuanced understanding of program implementation and key local stakeholders.** Agencies often engage their field offices through surveys.
- Various levels of agency leadership play important roles as learning agendas are developed, including **subagency or program office directors, evaluation office leaders, and senior political appointees**.
- Interviewees noted that offices should be prepared to accompany their internal engagement with some degree of **education around evidence building**. Generating an appreciation for research and evaluation among program offices will improve an agency's ability to enact the learning agenda.

External Engagement Process

- Agencies have supplemented their development of research questions internally with the input of external stakeholders, including **researchers, interest groups, professional associations, state and local governments, practitioners, and others**.
- Agencies have used several methods to seek this input, including **email outreach, websites, individual meetings, presentations, requests for information, roundtables, convenings and conferences, and advisory bodies or communities of practice.**
- Agencies must consider how to **engage external research stakeholders without creating conflicts** that prevent them from bidding on a request for proposals produced by the research agenda.
- Agencies should consider **when to engage external audiences and how best to frame their engagement**. Asking stakeholders to suggest research questions may be less effective than having them react to materials.
- Agencies should be aware of **trade-offs in the extent to which external stakeholders are involved and the representativeness of those involved**. The greater the breadth of stakeholders engaged, the more challenging and resource intensive it may be for agencies to achieve consensus and buy-in on priorities.
- In all cases, agencies will need to **consider the resources and capacities they have for developing a learning agenda and tailor their outreach accordingly.**

Engaging Government Stakeholders beyond the Agency

- Some interviewees reported their agencies have sought feedback from **OMB** to develop learning agendas. OMB is a key partner in translating the learning agenda into budgeted projects by developing the president's budget request and reviewing agencies' congressional budget justifications.
- According to those interviewed, **Congress** has typically provided limited input on agencies' learning agendas, and its involvement is usually confined to writing legislative requirements for evaluations. Nonetheless, agencies have received occasional requests from Congress to study certain topics, and keeping track of these requests can inform the agency's learning priorities.
- Through **interagency engagement**, staff learn from peers at other federal agencies who have developed learning agendas. Some have done this by consulting with standing interagency bodies established for research and evaluation purposes. An agency may also engage with other agencies if its research topics overlap or if studies are funded by partnerships of multiple agencies.

What Happens After?

- Upon completing the learning agenda document, **some agencies publicly post it; others keep it as an internal document.**

- Most agency learning agendas are s**ubject to regular updates either annually or at a multiyear interval**. Many agencies consider their learning agendas to be **living documents** that can be updated as budgetary and political conditions change.
- **Disseminating** the knowledge gained through the learning agenda process is an ongoing practice for many agencies. This involves follow-up meetings with external stakeholders who played a role in developing the learning agenda.

The process of developing a learning agenda—including working with agency offices to consider the state of evidence, what the gaps are, how to fill those gaps with research and evaluation activities, and how to use existing evidence—may be just as valuable as the resulting document. Building the infrastructure and strategies of learning from internal and external stakeholders through the learning agenda process is a critical step toward operationalizing evidence-based policymaking.

Introduction

This brief is part of the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative's[1] efforts to support federal capacity for building and using evidence. One key element of an agency's approach to evidence building is its plan for identifying and prioritizing learning questions and activities, including evaluation, data analysis, and other forms of research. This process can take many forms and has multiple names, but it is most commonly known as a learning agenda (Nightingale, Fudge, and Schupmann 2018). Several government agencies and subagencies have developed formal learning agendas, and many more conduct activities aligned with learning agendas.

With recent signals from the Trump administration that agencies will be asked to develop learning agendas (see the section Learning Agendas in Federal Policy later in this brief), agency leaders will need to consider how to create a learning agenda process that fits their particular context and needs. One valuable resource is a landscape analysis of existing federal learning agendas conducted by the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID (USAID 2017). The landscape analysis provides insight into the full process of developing a learning agenda, with an emphasis on its own bureaus' existing and nascent learning agendas.

This brief aims to complement previous research such as the landscape analysis by focusing deeply on a critical, early step in the learning agenda process: stakeholder engagement. We describe the varying approaches agencies have used so far to engage with both internal and external stakeholders in identifying and prioritizing research questions and in disseminating and updating learning agendas. Through more than a dozen interviews with current and former federal staff, we lay out examples and identify common threads between the approaches agencies have taken for stakeholder engagement. Because every agency's structure, needs, and resources vary, however, we do not recommend best practices—there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meaningfully engaging relevant stakeholders. Rather, we present multiple strategies, each with its own benefits and drawbacks, to consider when developing a stakeholder engagement process.

Methodology

This brief is primarily a product of qualitative, semistructured interviews with 14 current and former staff from eight federal agencies (the appendix provides a list of agencies of federal officials interviewed). In a few instances, we interviewed several members of the same agency. In some cases, we interviewed staff from a department-level evaluation office with staff from one of the department's subagency evaluation offices. In another, we interviewed a senior official and an analyst from the same office to get the perspective of both political leadership and the career staff charged with implementing the learning agenda process. Interviewees have all been or are currently involved in their organization's learning agenda development process. We identified them through various means, such as USAID's landscape analysis, suggestions from Urban Institute colleagues familiar with federal evaluation, recommendations from federal experts, and suggestions from interviewees themselves.

An extensive document review informed the interview protocol and it was validated by colleagues familiar with the federal evaluation field. All interviewees spoke on their own behalf; their views do not necessarily reflect those of their agencies. We recorded and transcribed interviews for accuracy and analyzed and organized them by common themes. We gave interviewees a chance to review insights directly drawn from their interviews. Because interviewees provided their comments anonymously, the specific examples included in this paper are largely drawn from the limited number of agencies that have made learning agenda materials public.

Learning Agendas in Federal Policy

Interest in improving how the federal government uses evidence to make decisions has grown over the past decade. The bipartisan Commission on Evidence Based Policymaking's work has been a significant milestone for the evidence-based policymaking field. This effort, sponsored by Speaker Ryan and Senator Murray, reflected months of engagement with experts and key government stakeholders. Among its recommendations is that all federal departments "develop multi-year learning agendas" (CEBP 2017, 102).

The commission contextualizes learning agendas as a direct response to a specific challenge: "Federal departments frequently do not have an integrated approach or a long-range plan for evidence building" (CEBP 2017, 93). By identifying the research and policy questions most essential to an agency's mission, a multiyear, regularly updated learning agenda empowers agency leadership to focus research activities on high-priority questions (CEBP 2017).

The Trump administration has also taken steps to stimulate learning agenda development. The president's fiscal year 2019 budget encourages agencies to adopt learning agendas and emphasizes the need for engagement with a range of key stakeholders, including administration and agency leadership, policy and program offices, external researchers, and congressional interests (OMB 2018a). The Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) 2018 Strategic Review Guidance stated that each agency would be required to provide an "update on agency progress in developing a learning agenda" as part of its Strategic Review (OMB 2018b, 4). Most recently, in June 2018, the president's report, *Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations*, directed all agencies to "establish and utilize multi-year learning agendas" (Executive Office of the President 2018, 120). This language echoes prior documents' emphasis on strategic evidence building and stakeholder engagement (Executive Office of the President 2018).

Another key outcome of the commission's work is the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2017, which would put into law several of the commission's recommendations. This legislation (which has been passed by the House) instructs each agency developing an "agency evidence-building plan" to consult a range of key stakeholders, including its own evaluation experts, officials responsible for its privacy policies, its chief data officer, its performance improvement officer, program administrators, statistics officials, House and Senate committees with oversight jurisdiction over the agency, and the public.[2]

Motivations for Developing a Learning Agenda

Agencies have had varying motivations for developing learning agendas, such as fulfilling legislative requirements, responding to external oversight pressure, and hoping to excite important constituencies about research and evaluation. These motivations have in turn influenced whom they sought input from. This section identifies several of these common motivations and what their implications have been for stakeholder engagement.

Fulfilling Legislative Requirements

Congress may require in legislation that some agencies develop a learning agenda, research plan, or similar planning document. For example, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires the Department of Labor's (DOL's) Employment & Training Administration (ETA) to have a five-year research plan. Legislation may also spell out the types of stakeholders an agency should engage. WIOA, for instance, requires that when ETA studies "prior learning" accreditation programs that serve veterans and dislocated workers, it must do so "through convening stakeholders from the fields of education, workforce, business, labor, defense, and veterans services."[3]

Standing Up an Evaluation Unit

Some agencies embarked on developing their learning agenda as part of standing up their centralized evaluation unit, seeing it as a natural way to begin consolidating evaluation efforts into one office and planning their future role in the agency. Engaging stakeholders as part of this learning agenda development process can also introduce other agency offices to the evaluation office.

Research Budget Planning

Agencies often use learning agendas to plan how they will use their research and evaluation budgets. A plan organizing agency-wide research efforts around agreed-upon priorities ensures that resources are directed toward the agency's most important learning goals. As one interviewee noted, "It's not just to say, 'What would I like to know?' but 'How do I prioritize what I would like to know on the assumption that there's not unlimited funding?' It's a management planning document for resource utilization as well as identifying and prioritizing the issues." As mentioned in the Engaging OMB section later in this brief, a plan can also signal to OMB what resources are needed to effectively carry out research and evaluation priorities. OMB and congressional appropriators are thus key stakeholders to engage (see the Engaging Nongovernmental Stakeholders section).

Building Capacity and Leadership in the Field

Developing a learning agenda can help agencies build their research capacity. Creating a learning agenda signals an investment in quality research that will provide more robust data and knowledge in the future. It can also serve as a signal to its various audiences of the agency's intended leadership in the field's research and evaluation efforts. Some interviewees said that their learning agenda should focus on leveraging their agency's comparative advantage, meaning it should address what the agency can do that others cannot. This can in turn signal to congressional appropriators the value of the agency's office of research and evaluation to both government actors and external organizations.

Reaction to Criticism

Criticism from government oversight bodies, such as the Government Accountability Office or an agency's inspector general, or to external expert organizations can trigger an agency to reform its research efforts by developing a learning agenda. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) *Research Roadmap*, for example, was developed in part in response to the National Research Council's 2008 report finding that the Office of Policy Development and Research's (PD&R) research-agenda setting process was not "achieving its potential" (HUD 2013). By codifying long-term research priorities and describing the knowledge gaps an agency hopes to address, a learning agenda can help to restore confidence in the agency's research capacity. Answering to external pressure may bring with it expectations of engaging with the organizations that applied pressure or stakeholders they identify.

Excite Constituencies

Finally, developing a learning agenda can generate enthusiasm among an agency's constituencies for the use and importance of evidence in the field. A learning agenda can signal to an agency's field that research and evaluation are important. Through external stakeholder engagement, an agency can give external organizations a sense of having a "seat at the table." This process can be an impetus for long-term partnerships and mutually beneficial connections between an agency and external organizations. In addition, widespread support for an agency among its stakeholders may deter attempts to reduce funding for agency research offices.

Developing Learning Agendas: The Stakeholder Engagement Process

Developing a learning agenda involves identifying an agency's priorities and research questions of interest as well as identifying what is and is not already known in its field and how it can help fill these gaps. Partnering with a variety of internal and external stakeholders to answer these questions is therefore crucial. The next sections review the wide range of stakeholders an agency may want to engage with and the range of methods that it can use to do so. The sections are organized based on the order in which each type of stakeholder is typically engaged; agencies usually approach internal stakeholders first, followed by external nongovernmental audiences. Governmental stakeholders beyond the agency, such as OMB and Congress, have been engaged at different points throughout the process and are described last.

As USAID's landscape analysis of learning agendas captures, there are, broadly, three ways of engaging with stakeholders. These methods can be used to engage both with internal stakeholders, such as various offices within an agency, and external ones, such as academic researchers, interest groups, or practitioners. The research or evaluation office leading the effort can *inform* by giving stakeholders information about their learning agenda; *consult* by "seek[ing] feedback from stakeholders at a certain time to inform decision-making"; or *involve* or *collaborate with* by actively working together with stakeholders to identify ideas for the learning agenda (USAID 2017). The level of involvement stakeholders play in an agency's learning agenda development often depends on the agency's resources, leadership and staff buy-in, and other factors. Interviewees for this paper used all three of these methods. The time it takes an agency to engage stakeholders and develop a learning agenda has varied as well. One interviewee reported that the full process took them from 9 to 12 months to complete; others reported it took upwards of 18 months (HUD 2013).

The following section discusses how an agency may go about working with its own staff, which is often the first step in developing a learning agenda. We then turn to how an agency may seek input from external stakeholders and from governmental stakeholders beyond the agency.

Internal Engagement Processes

Federal agencies have approached internal engagement in many ways depending on its structure, previous experience creating learning agendas, and intended use of the document. Internal engagement can be the most time-consuming and complex aspect of the engagement process, and subsequent conversations with external stakeholders are often based on it.

Who Leads Learning Agenda Development?

Learning agendas are typically developed by offices responsible for research, evaluation, and sometimes performance improvement, but where agencies house their research and evaluation activities varies significantly. Therefore, learning agendas to date have been developed at varying levels of federal agencies and by a wide range of offices.

At some federal agencies, there are evaluation and research offices within various subagencies as well as a central office that aggregates learning across the department. For example, the DOL's ETA has a research office responsible for developing ETA's learning agenda, but the DOL as a whole also has a Chief Evaluation Office responsible for rolling up each subagency's learning agendas and coordinating evaluation efforts more broadly. Other agencies have one interdisciplinary office that plays a coordinating research and policy role across the agency and conducts and funds most of the agency's research activities, such as PD&R at HUD. Still other agencies may primarily conduct research activities elsewhere; for example, the Small Business Administration does so within the office of the chief financial officer.

All agencies are different, and their stakeholder engagement will be affected by their institutional structure. Regardless of where the learning agenda process begins, however, a successful process will involve many stakeholders outside of the offices tasked with research, evaluation, or performance management at the agency—good research questions can come from all parts of an agency.

Strategies for Engaging Internal Stakeholders

An agency's internal engagement of stakeholders is typically an iterative process involving meeting and working with its program offices to learn about different programs and determine what research questions they would like answered. Because program office staff are the employees closest to the programs that an agency implements, they are typically most knowledgeable about what questions—whether specific to their programs or about their fields more broadly—still need to be answered.

In these meetings, evaluation staff and program staff may discuss

- what they already know from the body of evidence generated over recent years;
- what they're learning from evaluations currently under way;
- questions that remain of interest to the field;
- ideas that the current administration and Congress are interested in;
- questions of highest priority to program staff; and
- the types of information program staff would like to have to better inform their programmatic decisionmaking in the future.

These conversations are often brainstorming exercises and need not lead to fully formed research questions. Evaluation office staff can work with program staff to mold their ideas, research topics, and questions into more formal research questions. As the Education about Evidence Building section later in this brief describes, program staff will likely be less familiar with the language of evaluation and evidence building or how a research question is typically constructed. Evaluation staff must remain flexible in working with program staff and present the learning agenda development process to them as collaborative rather than one-sided or extractive.

After evaluation staff have gained a sense of program office ideas and priorities, they must identify areas of overlap, consolidate, and prioritize these questions into a broader learning agenda.

Depending on the agency, however, conversations with program offices may not involve asking them to propose research topics and questions. In some cases, an agency may have strict guidelines or statutory limits on how their evaluation funds may be used or may have funds scattered across program offices dedicated to specific projects. In this case, research planning does not include identifying topics for research and evaluation—it focuses instead on how to use their funds as directed or within their constraints.

In addition to gaining the insights of program office staff, this engagement process can generate staff buy-in toward using research and evaluation to guide programmatic decisionmaking. Gaining buy-in early contributes to success later because the learning agenda should guide policy and program implementation after its creation. Regardless of the method of engagement, maintaining internal stakeholders' interest at the beginning of the process and building relationships for the long term are important. This can be done through regular communication about the progress of creating the agenda and finding ways to make the agenda relevant for program staff.

Evaluation offices have taken a range of approaches to staffing their learning agenda development process and organizing meetings with program offices. In some evaluation offices, staff are assigned based on their expertise, interests, or organizational needs to work with particular program offices to generate these research questions. A benefit of this approach is that evaluation staff either continue existing relationships or form new, ongoing ones with the program offices they're assigned to and gain an in-depth understanding of their priorities. One person noted, however, that this approach can make "coming back to the table" difficult. That is, evaluation staff may have a deep understanding of program office priorities and ideas, but no one "at the helm" has participated in discussions with all program offices and can prioritize research questions after ideas are generated. For this reason, an evaluation office may want to involve the person leading the effort in as many program office meetings as feasible. The way an agency's evaluation office staffs the learning agenda development process depends on its staff resources and constraints.

Some interviewees have found it is useful to brief both their most senior leadership (such as a secretary and deputy secretary) as well as the leadership of subagencies to explain what staff engagement is needed during the process. This helps leadership at all levels understand the process and staff time commitment and helps them dedicate appropriate resources to the effort.

Methods of Engagement

Agencies have taken several approaches, ranging in complexity and resource requirements, to engaging with and gaining buy-in from the staff in program offices (and elsewhere in an agency). This section describes each, identifying benefits and drawbacks and providing examples.

Individual Meetings

One of the most common methods of engaging is through one-on-one meetings with program staff and leadership. These meetings can be a free-flowing and brainstorming conversation or a more structured opportunity for program staff to respond to materials, such as concept notes, that evaluation staff have already developed. These meetings tend to be between evaluation office staff and program office leadership, who may have a better sense of their program's strategic learning priorities.

One interviewee noted that she tried to have one meeting with leadership from all program offices together, but it was ineffective because there was a sense of competition for scarce evaluation resources. This left less room for effective idea generation and created tension around prioritizing one program office's questions over another's. For this reason, it may be more productive to have discussions with program offices individually and then rely on evaluation office and senior leadership to prioritize projects.

Group Discussions

Other agencies formed or refined their learning questions by convening larger group discussions with staff from program or other offices. For example, in developing its Food for Progress learning agenda, USDA staff held a roundtable with 35 USDA staff members from at least five subagencies (USDA 2016). Similarly, HUD's PD&R held 16 "listening sessions" with HUD staff across the department (HUD 2013). Interviewees who had experience using this method found it helpful to provide some background materials and draft learning questions to guide the discussion and then allow ideation. Moreover, several interviewees emphasized the importance of skilled facilitation to encourage inclusive participation; although some agencies have used consultants to facilitate discussions, others have relied on internal experts and online resources about effective facilitation strategies.

Hosting group discussions opens the engagement process to more staff and thus a greater number of perspectives. A group discussion also allows group members to build on each other's ideas. However, it may be more difficult to reach consensus, as noted previously in the Individual Meetings section. It is also important to include program leadership in these conversations because they may have a more strategic perspective that allows for prioritization discussions.

Surveys

Agencies have used surveys in different ways to gain input from internal stakeholders. Instead of serving as an open-ended medium for respondents to send input, they have typically asked for feedback on ideas that have already been developed. For example, USAID's Center of Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance sent out a survey to their field staff asking them to prioritize a list of research questions proposed by the Washington-based team. Field staff were asked to assign between 15 and 20 questions high, medium, and low priority for multiple themes. HUD conducted a web survey among PD&R staff "asking them to react to the priority research areas identified" in the external-facing conference they had held (box 2). It also asked for their thoughts about potential research questions and about the office's strengths and weaknesses (HUD 2013).

Internal Advisory Groups

Some agencies have formed standing internal advisory groups to inform the development or updating of their learning agenda. For example, the Learning Agenda Advisory Group for USAID's Center on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) comprised one staff member from each division at DRG and helped develop research questions and inform the stakeholder engagement process. An advisory group can give staff from a broad group of program areas ownership over the learning agenda and can serve as a steward of the engagement or prioritization and consolidation processes.

Engaging Local, Regional, and International Field Offices

Regional, state, and local offices are important stakeholders to engage because they can provide a nuanced understanding of how their agency's programs are implemented and of the local stakeholders critical to the process. However, because of the challenges of engaging field staff, creating a learning agenda can often become a headquarters-driven activity. In most cases, engagement of field offices has been in one direction: agencies send them information about the learning agenda rather than asking for their input. Interviewees reported that engaging field offices would have been a time-consuming process, and it would have been challenging to prioritize their input. Nonetheless, many staff who have worked on federal learning agendas reported that they should have engaged their field offices more thoroughly and planned to do so in the future.

Agencies that substantively engaged their field offices often used surveys to request input on research questions and topics that were already developed. As noted in the Surveys section, field offices have been asked to prioritize sets of research questions. They have also had opportunities to provide more open-ended input on these surveys. Web-based conference technology could help overcome distance-related communication challenges and allow for more in-depth conversations with field offices. For instance, USAID's Conservation Enterprise's learning agenda facilitators used webinars and other web-based methods to engage field staff from eight countries (USAID 2016).

Depending on the history of performance management efforts at the agency, some relationship-building efforts may be needed to effectively engage field staff in the development of the learning agenda. Field offices can be skeptical of efforts they perceive have no returned value. One interviewee noted that their field offices had become accustomed to reporting performance metrics to "the black void known as headquarters, and nothing ever happened with it." To ensure returned value, USAID's Conservation Enterprises disseminated knowledge products, including a "wiki" repository of implementation lessons, designed to help field staff implement programs more effectively.[4]

Departmental structure can also affect how easily field staff can be engaged. Some agencies have a regional structure in which all program areas report to one management office. In such cases, gathering feedback can be easier because this office can provide cross-program insights or assign staff to the effort. Where field offices report directly to their program leadership, evaluation offices often must work through multiple subagencies at headquarters, and it can be more difficult to work directly with field staff.

Leadership Involvement

Various levels of agency leadership play important roles throughout the learning agenda development process. At the subagency or program office level, the leadership most involved typically includes the subagency or program office directors and deputy directors in one-on-one or group settings. Depending on the agency, this will be a combination of political and career leaders. In the evaluation office, leadership such as a chief evaluation officer is directly involved. At one agency, the chief evaluation officer often participated in meetings with subagency and program office leadership and consolidated the department-wide learning agenda from each subagency's individual agendas.

Interviewees noted that successful learning agenda development requires evaluation office leadership to support the staff conducting it, devote sufficient time and resources to making it happen, and apply leverage where needed to overcome roadblocks. Interviewees also reported that having a clear process of engaging stakeholders, and clear communication about that process, is crucial. Evaluation office leadership must map out how the process will look and then socialize the plan with internal stakeholders, including senior leadership. If different internal stakeholders are not aware of how the process will unfold and where the touchpoints of engagement exist, their buy-in may unravel.

Senior Leadership

The roles of an agency's more senior political leadership, such as secretary and deputy secretary, are more limited and vary significantly but remain important. They are typically kept abreast of the learning agenda process but do not play day-to-day roles in it. In many cases, after research questions are developed, evaluation office leadership will conduct meetings with senior leadership to give them a chance to add questions, prioritize questions, or offer other guidance. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) learning agenda team presented their findings and recommendations to SAMHSA's Executive Leadership Team and incoming assistant secretary (SAMHSA 2017a). Meetings with senior leadership can take several forms; in one case, an interviewee created a presentation and brochure for the agency's senior leadership.

Some agencies' senior leadership may be more involved than others' depending on their interest in and understanding of research and evaluation and their focus on specific issue areas. For example, a secretary may provide input on an issue area that he or she is passionate about or ensure that research on that topic is represented on the agenda.

Some interviewees found it was important to obtain approval for the stakeholder engagement process that would be used to gather inputs to the learning agenda; others briefed political leadership later in the process as part of obtaining their feedback. One agency named "executive champions" who would engage with senior leadership and program offices on learning agenda discussions and evaluation proposals. As members of senior management, executive champions can provide resources and support and help keep agency offices accountable for supporting evaluation studies and ensuring that their findings inform program operation.

When political leadership is less engaged, several interviewees suggested that evaluation office leaders can help build buy-in by providing research support for administration strategies and initiatives. Some evaluation offices have left flexibility in their budgeting for research studies on priority topics and new ideas that might be driven by a political leader. Although building a learning agenda that reflects the interests of senior leaders is important, the priorities of political leadership, the needs identified by the evaluation office, and the evaluation products mandated by Congress may not all align. This is an inherent conflict in creating any learning agenda, and staff must be ready to negotiate a consensus.

Interviewees reported it is important to recognize that “the politics of evaluation cannot be ignored.” Political leadership may not be interested in the results of some evaluations and may work to undermine or suppress such reports. Having an evaluation policy statement that asserts an evaluation office’s independence from undue political influence could be an important safeguard against this scenario (Nightingale and Scott 2018). Political leadership should also understand that many evaluations take a long time to complete, and the results of an evaluation they are interested in may only be realized after they’ve left the agency. Therefore, stakeholders should ensure early on that leadership is committed to building this knowledge even if the process continues beyond “their own time horizons.”

Regardless of leadership’s level of involvement, interviewees spoke of the importance of keeping leadership engaged to some extent because doing so raises the profile of the process and signals its importance internally. Strategically, keeping leadership involved is beneficial so they can provide needed support and resources. Keeping leadership updated throughout the process also ensures that the eventual agenda aligns with leadership’s (and the administration’s) strategic goals, mitigating the risk of creating a learning agenda that has strayed from what leadership is interested in and will adopt. Some agencies explicitly organize their learning agenda around their strategic plan, listing research questions that will advance each strategic goal.

Education about Evidence Building

Evaluation offices should be prepared to accompany their internal engagement with some degree of education about evidence building. Interviewees reported this as an integral part of an evaluation office’s job. As noted, although program staff are experts in their programs and their implementation, they are often less familiar with how to conduct research and evaluation, why they’re important, or the technical language of the evaluation field. This is especially likely in offices and agencies that have not previously conducted research and evaluation in a significant way. In fact, in many cases, staff may be wary of evaluations because they believe poor evaluation results may lead to program budget cuts.

Thus, building closer working relationships between program offices and evaluation offices has become an important task for evaluation leadership. Generating an appreciation for research and evaluation among program offices will improve an agency’s ability to create a learning agenda and enact it later. Cultivating these relationships may also involve an attitude shift toward viewing program staff as collaborators.

Developing productive relationships and building a culture of learning can also guard against program offices and other offices in an agency considering the learning agenda as just another compliance activity rather than a meaningful process. Some interviewees described how they try to generate excitement within their agency about research and evaluation and build a "culture of evidence" in which constantly asking questions, learning, and applying the learning to program and policy decisions is valued and a part of daily functioning.

In meetings between evaluation staff and program offices to identify research questions of interest, a few strategies have been used to accommodate different levels of comfort with the language of research and evaluation. Some research staff have avoided research terms altogether, simply asking program staff what questions, if answered, would help them in their work or asking how data and information could assist with known stumbling blocks. Participants in brainstorming sessions were also told not to worry about the specific language and to focus just on the ideas. Evaluation offices have also accompanied these conversations with workshops on logic models or other evaluation tools.

External Engagement Processes

Agencies have supplemented their development of research questions internally with the input of external stakeholders, including researchers, interest groups, professional associations, state and local governments, practitioners, and others. These groups provide valuable insights on the state of knowledge and evidence within their field as well as what topics may be most beneficial for an agency to prioritize. This section details the ways that agencies have sought external input and why it is good practice to do so. The section that follows discusses how external *government* stakeholders, such as OMB, Congress, and other agencies, have been engaged as well.

Why to Engage External Audiences

Engaging external audiences when developing a learning agenda is beneficial for several reasons. Most simply, agencies have wanted help identifying research questions or topics to include in their learning agendas or reflections on the research questions they've already developed. Agencies have viewed experts in their fields as important sounding boards and idea generators about where their research and learning efforts should be headed. In other cases, agencies have been required by legislation or administration directives to engage external stakeholders. More broadly, ensuring that government programs are meeting the needs of their constituents is a good practice. These constituents may have ideas on how programs can be improved or on research to test these programs. The level of engagement of external stakeholders has varied from soliciting new research questions to seeking feedback on and prioritization of questions already developed.

Some interviewees have also viewed their agencies' external stakeholder engagement as a way of building a natural accountability mechanism (see the What Happens After section later in this brief). By involving external stakeholders while setting an agency's research priorities (or at least socializing the process with them), agencies create an expectation among their constituencies that these learning efforts will be carried out (and ultimately be of value to their constituencies). Involving external stakeholders in the planning process of an agency's research and evaluation can also generate excitement in the field for the agency's contributions and show its constituencies that it values research. In addition to making the process more transparent, this engagement may also help outside researchers consider how to focus their own research agendas to respond to or complement an agency's work.

Strategies for Engaging the Nongovernmental Stakeholders

Identifying Whom to Engage

Although agencies are typically aware of and have existing relationships with constituencies interested in their research—including prominent researchers in their fields and relevant associations, advocacy groups, and practitioners—they may not have a comprehensive process for pinpointing whom to engage around learning agenda development. One method an agency used to identify external stakeholders was to create a matrix with the research and evaluation areas of expertise it was looking for and then, using the knowledge of its staff or sometimes working with a contractor, identify possible experts who cover those areas. Larger associations may also be able to help steer agencies toward whom to involve. For example, as part of their engagement processes, USAID's staff engaged InterAction, an association for implementing partners or nongovernmental organizations that work in international development. Another expert emphasized the importance of attending conferences within their agency's purview to keep up with the field's research and expertise.

Some agencies may be able to rely on the existing relationships or established peer review processes they have with external stakeholders that have informed other aspects of their work (see the Standing Advisory Bodies section later in this brief). Some agencies, such as the DOL's Chief Evaluation Office, engage technical working groups or subject matter experts to consult with on specific projects or programs. Similarly, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau leverages an "academic research council," which is composed of six to eight academic experts in a variety of related subfields, for advice on "research methodologies, data collection, and analytic strategies."[5] These networks of stakeholders can also be sources for learning agenda development.

Methods of Engagement

Agencies can use several methods, ranging in degree of complexity and resource requirements, to seek input from external audiences. The type of method must be matched with the agency's resources, internal capacities, and buy-in. The next several sections describe these methods, including the benefits and drawbacks identified by interviewees that have used them, in order of complexity. Further, box 1 describes one case of a subagency using a contractor to carry out its stakeholder engagement process. Other agencies have hired contractors or consultants as well, taking advantage of their expertise in facilitating collaboration and process management.

Email Outreach

A common method of reaching out to external stakeholders is simply through existing email lists. Agencies can ask stakeholders to propose research questions or topics or respond to ideas that an agency has already developed. Although email outreach is a simple and less resource-intensive method of engagement, some interviewees have found that the response rate is low. As will be detailed, staff have found in-person meetings to be more useful for enabling longer and more detailed discussion.

Web-Based Platforms

Another low-touch option to solicit input is engaging external audiences through a website. For HUD's Research Roadmap, for example, stakeholders could send suggestions through a link posted on the HUD USER website and included in email outreach.[6]

Websites are a highly transparent and egalitarian way to seek input; they offer the potential for many people to both propose research questions or topics *and* see those proposed by others. One suggestion for future learning agendas made by an interviewee was to explore online voting mechanisms, in which stakeholders could submit their ideas as well as vote on others' ideas, instead of having the ideas go directly to the agency's staff first. This could increase transparency while crowdsourcing the prioritization process.

BOX 1

External Engagement Using a Contractor

DOL's ETA develops a public-facing learning agenda[a] that looks forward five years in addition to their annual internal learning agenda, which is developed in collaboration with the department's Chief Evaluation Office. Previously, under Section 171 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and carried over to Section 169 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, "after consultation with States, localities, and other interested parties, the Secretary of Labor is to prepare a plan that describes demonstration and pilot, multi-service, research, and multistate projects that focus on employment and training priorities for the five-year period following the plan." For plans previously developed under the Workforce Investment Act, they contracted with Rutgers University's John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development to conduct both internal and external engagement processes and to assist in drafting the learning agenda document itself. The Heldrich Center used a variety of the engagement methods described in the text. To solicit input from employment and training experts, including academic researchers and the research staff of state workforce development agencies, the Heldrich Center convened ad-hoc expert panel discussions at various workforce conferences and hosted a National Workforce Development Research Symposium. The day-long symposium included a series of structured discussion sessions, each focusing on a type of program intervention or methodological tool. In addition, Heldrich Center staff gathered research questions through one-on-one interviews with over 50 stakeholders, including researchers, advocates, state administrators, workforce agency directors, and representatives of governance associations such as the National Governors Association. The Heldrich Center created a website that enabled employees of ETA and state-level labor agencies to submit comments on the draft and suggest key areas for future research. Heldrich sought similar feedback from external stakeholders through email blasts to a targeted list of experts and others.

The resulting report prepared by the Heldrich Center served as the foundational resource of the plans drafted by ETA. Efforts are now underway to develop the first plan under the new WIOA legislation.

[a] "Five-Year Research Plan," US Department of Labor, accessed September 4, 2018, https://www.doleta.gov/research/five-year-research-plan.cfm.

Individual Meetings

Arranging individual meetings with stakeholders is a common outreach strategy. As discussed, some agencies have found that in-person (or phone) meetings have been a more effective way of seeking input or responses. As one of our respondents said, "Most of our comments came when we set up appointments with people and said we'd like to come and talk to you and get your sense of priorities for [the agency]… and you'd sit down for an hour or two and talk it through."

Presentations

There is also value in presenting an agency's efforts to develop a learning agenda to a group of stakeholders, giving audience members an opportunity to provide input while also socializing the agency's efforts with them. USAID's Conservation Enterprises' learning agenda, for instance, was presented at the Global Environment Officers State of the Art Workshop in Washington, DC (USAID 2016). Another agency gave a presentation to an audience at a Washington-based think tank to let them know what they were doing, opening the door for them to provide input.

Requests for Information

Sending out requests for information, such as notices in the Federal Register,[7] provides agencies a wide, public audience, but most agencies have not used this method. Using the Federal Register allows the public to weigh in on an agency's research priorities, but it also gives the agency many responses to review. Additionally, Federal Register notices require time to conduct and time to review the responses, which some offices may not have. In some cases, legislation may require an agency or subagency to publish a notification in the Federal Register, like WIOA does for DOL's ETA learning agenda.

Roundtables

Agencies have frequently used roundtables or similar smaller-group meetings to gather common stakeholders together. This approach offers a group setting in which participants may bounce ideas off each other, but it is more manageable than larger convenings or conferences, which typically require more planning and resources. One agency, for example, carried out reviews of existing knowledge on particular issue or topic areas to assess key considerations for future research. One of their strategies was to convene roundtables of experts that included stakeholders from external sources to help identify the key research questions and areas of research to prioritize for each issue area.

Convenings and Conferences

If agencies have the resources, they may want to consider holding one or more convenings or conferences to which they invite researchers, practitioners, or other stakeholders. Some agencies have used these events as a chance for stakeholders to pose research questions and topics to include in the learning agenda as well as to obtain stakeholders' feedback and help in narrowing down the focus of ideas that have already been generated. USAID's Feed the Future program, for example, used convenings of evaluation professionals, academic researchers, and nonprofit leaders to hone its learning agenda questions (USAID 2017). In contrast to roundtables, the size of conferences provides an opportunity for agencies to engage with a wide range of issue areas and stakeholders. Conferences are beneficial for getting a wider sense of "what is known [in the field] and what is needed to be known."

Hosting sessions at conferences planned by others in the field is also a good way of meeting stakeholders and getting a sense of where additional research is needed. An agency may be able to use the gathering of relevant stakeholders at an externally planned conference to get key expert feedback for a comparatively low cost in staff time and travel.

BOX 2

HUD Research Roadmap Conference

HUD hosted a Research Roadmap Conference that brought together practitioner partners, academics, advocates, and HUD employees to gather input for its five-year strategic research plan. Ahead of the conference, PD&R staff developed framing memos for each of HUD's strategic goals, identifying current research, potential gaps, and remaining questions that could be addressed. Attendees were sorted into breakout sessions for each of HUD's strategic goals, each with their own framing memo, and they devised a short list of key research questions for each goal. HUD compiled 187 suggestions from conference attendees and then gauged their priorities through an electronic voting process aligned with each breakout session. Later, HUD categorized and analyzed these comments along with 813 more comments made through other modes of engagement, including listening sessions with internal and external stakeholders, an internal survey of PD&R staff, and email. These inputs were used as the basis for developing HUD's research priorities, as laid out in its final Research Roadmap.

a "About PD&R," US Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed September 4, 2018, https://www.huduser.gov/portal/about/pdr_roadmap.html.

Although external stakeholders are typically engaged in parallel to or following the internal engagement process, HUD's research conference was conducted before their internal listening sessions with PD&R divisions and program offices. What they learned as part of the conference framed their conversations with program offices. Box 2 provides more information about HUD's Research Roadmap conference.[8]

Advisory Bodies on Learning and Evaluation

Some agencies have developed advisory bodies or communities of practice to discuss and share their learning and evaluation processes. They are spaces in which agencies can learn how others are improving their learning processes as well as share and receive feedback on the learning agendas themselves. For example, USAID's DRG and their implementing partners formed a DRG Learning Community of Practice that meets quarterly to discuss research and organizational learning (DRG 2017). Similarly, the US Department of Health and Human

Services formed the HHS Evaluation & Evidence Policy Council to share information and best practices on issues related to research and evaluation policy. This group consists of leaders of research and evaluation offices across the department and has been a sounding board for learning agenda development in the agency.

Advisory Bodies on Nonevaluation Matters

Standing advisory bodies that focus on topics unrelated to evaluation can also help agencies develop learning agendas. Practitioner members of SAMHSA's Advisory Committee for Women's Services flagged housing as a learning agenda priority for agency leadership (SAMHSA 2017b). Similarly, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau regularly convenes four advisory groups, the Consumer Advisory Board, Community Bank Advisory Council, Academic Research Council, and Credit Union Advisory Council, that can be tapped into.[9] Here, instead of structuring learning agenda input as a formal, standalone activity for the advisory body, learning-related issues may be addressed as they arise over the course of the advisory body's general activities.

Agencies should consider whether the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) applies to any advisory groups they consult with. Most agencies that currently have learning agendas did not create or consult with advisory groups that were governed by FACA. To guard against inadvertently violating FACA, one interviewee explained that they have a list of "do's" and "don'ts" that they discuss with their staff when seeking advice from external stakeholders. Most critically, because FACA applies when advisory groups provide recommendations, the agency states in their invitations to experts participating in roundtables or other feedback sessions that they are not seeking consensus but rather hoping to benefit from a range of perspectives.

Key Issues to Consider When Engaging Nongovernmental Stakeholders

Agencies may face some common questions as they engage external stakeholders to develop a learning agenda. Below are several reported by interviewees from offices that have undergone the process.

Offices responsible for research and evaluation at some agencies may not be top-of-mind for agency leadership when it comes to participating in external events or information gathering. One interviewee said that when leadership in their agency were engaged in conversations with outside groups, they often did not think of their research office as necessary partners. Evaluation office leaders might therefore need to highlight their value to these conversations to senior leaders or develop external engagement processes with similar stakeholders.

Agencies must consider how to engage external stakeholders without creating conflicts that prevent them from bidding on a request for proposals produced by the research agenda on which they provided input. To avoid this problem, an agency leader noted that they kept their engagement processes "wide rather than deep." This inadvertently and beneficially "opened yourself up to input from places you may not have expected." Another way to guard against this problem is to conduct the expert consultation but then make the information from that consultation available widely in the form of public notes, ensuring all researchers and organizations are on a level playing field for future evaluation opportunities.

Agencies should think about when in the process to engage an external audience. Agencies have conducted this outreach at varying times: some agencies engaged external stakeholders before consulting with their agency's program offices, some did it concurrently, and others conducted it afterward. The timing of outreach may also determine how external input is given. For example, if agencies consult with external stakeholders after a period of internal engagement, staff will be able to give external stakeholders material to respond to rather than having a more free-flowing conversation (this point will be discussed in more detail later in this brief).

Agencies should consider how best to frame their engagement with external audiences. There are several ways to prompt input and feedback from external stakeholders. For example, HUD wrote framing memos for each of its proposed research topics before its research conference and used them to guide conversations with external stakeholders. Other agencies asked stakeholders to provide input on and prioritize research questions and topics their internal stakeholders had surfaced. On the other hand, some agencies asked external stakeholders to propose research questions and topics, which yielded fewer responses. This suggests that asking stakeholders to provide questions may be less effective than having them react to materials. One interviewee said that the people they've reached out to generally appreciate being asked but do not suggest ideas without significant prompting.

Agencies should be aware of trade-offs in the extent to which external stakeholders are involved and the representativeness of their samples. The greater the breadth of stakeholders engaged, the more challenging and resource intensive it will be for agencies to achieve consensus and buy-in on what priorities are. This could lead stakeholders to feel their perspectives were not heard. One interviewee also noted that stakeholders' time should be respected; he suggested that an agency should only escalate engagement with a stakeholder from informing to collecting input when that input will actually be used.

Additionally, agencies should be aware of how they are reaching out to external stakeholders. If they are using the contacts that they already have or contacting those who are easiest to reach, there may be a trade-off concerning how well they are representing the field.

In all cases, **agencies will need to consider the resources and capacities they have for developing a learning agenda and tailor their outreach accordingly.** For example, fewer staff may make a large conference prohibitive; lower-touch methods such as a website, email, meetings, and others' conferences may make more sense.

Engaging Government Stakeholders beyond the Agency

In addition to engaging all the stakeholders described thus far, agencies will need to work with OMB and, to a certain extent, Congress as they develop their learning agendas. They may also work with other federal agencies. This section details what these relationships may look like for agencies.

Engaging the Office of Management and Budget

Many interviewees reported that OMB serves a critical role in the learning agenda development process. Recent presidential documents contain language indicating OMB may be responsible for directing agencies to conduct learning agendas in the future (Executive Office of the President 2018). All agencies were required to provide OMB with written updates on the state of their learning agendas as part of the 2018 Strategic Review process (OMB 2018b).

Agencies typically engage with OMB through their respective Resource Management Officers, and how involved Resource Management Officers have been in agencies' learning agenda efforts has varied. Some have been very hands-on regarding what the agency's learning agenda should look like; others have been less so and were satisfied being briefed at a high level about the agency's major priorities. One interviewee described a meeting with the OMB evidence team, the Resource Management Officer, and their Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs desk officer to make sure a range of OMB stakeholders were all updated. Because learning agendas often involve studies that require information collection, engaging the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs desk officer early in the process can help prepare for and facilitate future Paperwork Reduction Act submissions.

In some cases, OMB will offer input on an agency's research questions, either adding particular ideas of interest or reordering the agenda's prioritization. One interviewee said that their agency presented OMB with a broad list of ideas that they would have been satisfied with and received from OMB some prioritization of that list. In other cases, OMB will send an agency's learning agenda to other agencies whose work may overlap to get additional input. OMB has also provided input to ensure that an agency's learning agenda reflects the current administration's areas of interest.

Regardless of their level of involvement in content generation or prioritization, OMB is a key partner in translating the learning agenda into budgeted projects through development of the president's budget request and review of agency congressional budget justifications. And an agency's engagement with OMB on performance management through Annual Performance Plans, Annual Performance Reports, and Agency Priority Goals may all be informed by research and analysis included in the learning agenda. These budgetary and performance roles make OMB an important stakeholder to keep aware of an agency's learning agenda because the results of evaluations may affect future budget requests and modify performance indicators being tracked for agency programs.

Engaging Congress

Congress has played a limited role in providing input on agencies' learning agendas. In most cases, Congress's involvement is limited to writing legislative requirements for evaluations of an agency's programs or setting appropriations for an agency's evaluation funds. DOL's ETA, for example, considers the suggested evaluations written into WIOA legislation as it prioritizes its learning agenda.

Statutory language may also allow a certain percentage of funds to be set aside for research and evaluation. For example, appropriations language allows the Secretary of Labor to set aside up to 0.75 percent from specific DOL programmatic accounts to be transferred to the Chief Evaluation Office to carry out evaluations of any of the programs or activities that are funded under such accounts, provided the Chief Evaluation Officer submits a plan to the Appropriations Committees describing the evaluations to be carried out. The DOL Evaluation Plan serves this purpose.

Congressional committees typically have not provided specific feedback or input on an agency's learning agenda. Nonetheless, agencies have received occasional, often ad hoc, requests from Congress to study certain topics, which agencies may then incorporate into their learning priorities. For example, one interviewee reported that if its leadership were testifying in front of a congressional committee and they received questions or comments from committee members, these questions would signal to the evaluation office potential areas of interest to include in the agenda. In fact, one interviewee recommended keeping track of all the questions that an agency receives from Congress so that when the agency is setting its learning priorities, it knows that Congress is interested in a particular topic. Tracking these questions will usually involve partnership with an agency's Congressional Affairs Office or program office congressional liaisons.

Depending on an agency's history and institutional context, however, the learning agenda may play a heightened role in engagement with congressional stakeholders. One interviewee described the learning agenda development process as an opportunity to work with their appropriators and get their feedback in a manner that helped rebuild confidence in the agency's research agenda and office.

Interagency Engagement

Some agencies have also consulted with their peers at other federal agencies about how to develop a learning agenda. For example, a first-time learning agenda developer in one agency brought together personnel from several agencies for a day-long workshop to hear about and learn from their experiences.

Other agencies have consulted with standing interagency bodies established for research and evaluation purposes. For instance, one agency engaged with the Interagency Council on Evaluation Policy and the Cross-Agency Learning Community on Evidence and Evaluation. Rather than soliciting feedback on specific research topics, engagement with these bodies focused on conceptual or higher-level discussions about the parameters of the learning agenda process. Further, these bodies helped an interviewee create connections with individuals in other agencies, expanding the network of people whom they could readily consult as they developed their agency's learning agenda.

An agency may also engage with other agencies during this process if their research topics overlap or if its studies are carried out and funded by multiple agencies. Here, the learning agenda process can identify more opportunities for collaborating on research areas and for blending funds.

What Happens After?

Upon completing the learning agenda document, some agencies publicly post it; others keep it as an internal document. Depending on an agency's motivations for creating a learning agenda, it may share the final document with specific audiences. For example, an agency responding to criticism from Congress (see the Motivations section earlier in this brief) may share their learning agenda directly with congressional stakeholders.

External stakeholders have interacted with completed learning agendas in several ways. For instance, stakeholders who are particularly interested in a research question mentioned on the learning agenda might lobby appropriators to ensure that the agency receives funding to carry out the research. As previously mentioned in the Motivations section, external stakeholders' expectations may also serve as an accountability mechanism to ensure that the research activities envisioned in the learning agenda are actually carried out.

Updating the Learning Agenda

Most agency learning agendas are subject to regular updates either annually or at a multiyear interval. However, events may arise before the regular interval has elapsed that necessitate updating the learning agenda, such as a new piece of legislation that shifts an agency's mission or adds new areas of programmatic focus or a shift in leadership that produces a new set of priorities. For this reason, many agencies consider their learning agendas to be living documents that can be updated as legal and political conditions change. When determining how often to update their learning agenda, agencies should consider the availability of resources. One interviewee noted that an annual update may be too frequent because it draws resources exclusively to the generation of the learning agenda rather than its dissemination and enactment. Further, evaluations can take several years to yield results, so agencies may not have much each year to add to their learning agenda.

Updates can offer an opportunity to tweak the learning agenda process and reflect on what succeeded and what did not. For instance, if an agency was not able to complete all research activities on its learning agenda, the update can provide an opportunity to reflect on why this happened and potentially to narrow down future research activities to a smaller number of questions. These considerations may be most relevant when an agency has only recently adopted a learning agenda.

The stakeholder engagement process for updating a learning agenda has typically been much less exhaustive than the original process for creating the learning agenda. Often, stakeholders' views will not vary greatly over an interval of one year, or even a couple years.

Ongoing Stakeholder Engagement

Disseminating the knowledge gained through the learning agenda process is an ongoing practice for many agencies. This often involves follow-up meetings with external stakeholders who played a role in developing the learning agenda. For instance, USAID's DRG uses regular meetings with its Community of Practice (see the Advisory Bodies on Evaluation section), a standing body of external stakeholders, to share the results of its learning agenda process with practitioners and academics (DRG 2016). An agency wishing to inform stakeholders may continue web-based methods of engagement, such as email lists and webinars, after the learning agenda has been established. An agency may also wish to discuss learning agenda efforts and results on a panel or in a publication.

Typically, stakeholder engagement decreases in intensity after the learning agenda has been developed. However, this is not always the case; sometimes, agencies seek to build on learning agenda engagement to establish long-term partnerships with academic institutions. These partnerships may enable an agency to leverage another institution's resources, distinctive research expertise, and greater flexibility to expand evidence building.

Conclusion

There are many ways an agency can develop a learning agenda and engage internal and external stakeholders as part of the process. Agencies new to learning agendas can look to the work of their peers for best practices, such as the ones captured in this report, but they will also need to consider which stakeholders and methods of engagement are most appropriate based on their agency's context. For example, one agency may have more resources available than another, so organizing a conference like HUD's may be possible. Another agency may be more connected with its regional offices, so those offices might play a more meaningful role in the engagement process. Another may be required by Congress to issue requests for information in the Federal Register for input on research questions to include in its learning agenda.

Depending on how comprehensive an agency's internal and external engagement processes are, integrating all of these inputs may be challenging. Time and resource constraints may place natural limits on the amount of stakeholder input an agency can obtain, but as one interviewee put it, there is a limit to the amount of consensus building that can be done anyway. It is ultimately up to the office responsible for developing the learning agenda and its leader to make hard decisions about which research questions and topics to include and prioritize. One agency had a core team that significantly helped steward the process and iterate the questions generated until arriving at a final list.

Throughout the process, staff should keep in mind that the goal is for an agency's learning agenda to become a meaningful and useful document rather than a compliance activity. As several interviewees have found, a learning agenda has great potential for utility, but in order to unlock this potential, the office leading the effort must have buy-in throughout its agency. This is perhaps why building a culture of evidence—starting with cultivating relationships and trust between evaluation and program offices—has been so important to interviewees. Indeed, one interviewee stated that 95 percent of the work of developing a learning agenda is "building relationships, building rapport, getting a space at the table, [and] building credibility. That is the lion's share of the work. It's time-consuming, and it's very much contingent upon the leadership's buy-in and who the leaders are."

The *process* of developing a learning agenda—including working with an agency's subagencies to consider the state of the evidence, what the gaps are, and how to fill those gaps with research and evaluation activities, and how to use existing evidence—may be just as valuable as the resulting document. Building the infrastructure and strategies of learning from internal and external stakeholders through the learning agenda process goes a long way toward operationalizing evidence-based policymaking.

Appendix: Agencies of Federal Officials Interviewed

Interviews were conducted with one or more experts who currently or previously worked for each of the following federal agencies:

- Corporation for National and Community Service
- US Agency for International Development
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- US Department of Labor
- US Department of Health and Human Services
- US Small Business Administration
- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau
- National Science Foundation

Notes

1. https://www.evidencecollaborative.org/.
2. Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2017, H.R. 4174, 115th Cong. (2017).
3. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act §169(b)(4)(H), Pub L. No. 113-128, 128 Stat. 1425.
4. "USAID Learning Group Explores the Effectiveness of Enterprises as Conservation Strategy," meeting materials, accessed September 6, 2018 (Word document download).
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