Staffing to Support Evidence Culture and Capacity in the Federal Government

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Introduction

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 was part of this growing interest. The bipartisan commission’s report, released in September 2017, included 22 recommendations for improving access to data, strengthening privacy protections, and improving agency evidence-building capacity (Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking 2017).

In addition to the commission report, the White House budget documents presenting the administration’s proposals and priorities for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, and the 2018 President’s Management Agenda, include chapters on evidence (OMB 2017, OMB 2018a, OMB 2018b). The 2019 budget is subtitled “Efficient, Effective, Accountable”—terms that underlie evidence-based policymaking. President Trump’s 2018 reform plan echoes these sentiments and specifically stresses the need for learning agendas in federal agencies.

The commission’s recommendations and the White House budget and management documents are motivating some agencies to strengthen their existing evidence capacity. But there is no single process for accomplishing these goals. Every federal agency has its own 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 dedicating funding to do so; others have only minimal analytic experience and few resources.

Building a culture of evidence is often 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.

This brief provides guidance to chief evaluation officers and others leading evidence capacity development within federal agencies on how agencies with different resources might structure and staff their supporting functions. We begin with a short section to define what we mean by evidence culture and capacity. We then describe the different stages of the evidence process before outlining the key competencies needed to support it. Last, we offer different examples of how existing federal agencies have chosen to staff and structure their evidence functions.

Definitions

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 fiscal year 2018 budget...
included a discussion of “evidence culture” in terms of 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. This culture should transcend political ideology and be sustained across presidencies.

**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 2018a, 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 and vary in terms of their evidence capacity (Wandner and Chocolaadd 2017. However, if they receive federal funds, they must also submit regular reports on their use. Federal agencies, therefore, can promote a culture of evidence through the types of reporting they require of grantees. Some federal agencies specifically require their local grantees to conduct evaluations and report the results and integrate these expectations into their monitoring activities.³
Thus, there are many opportunities 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.

### Overview of the Evidence Process

Drawing from the definitions discussed previously in this brief and in the federal budget documents, the evidence process consists of four different stages with corresponding sets of activities (figure 1).

### Establish a Learning Agenda

A learning agenda is a set of activities that includes specifying research questions that guide an agency’s research and evaluation projects both short and long term (Nightingale, Fudge, and Schupmann 2018). 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. Detailed agency learning agendas, therefore, may remain internal working documents, even if they are made public at regular intervals to strengthen agency transparency, as suggested in the president’s reform plan.
Agencies typically engage in at least three steps in this process: stakeholder engagement, evidence review, and decisionmaking. First, internal agency stakeholders identify priority learning objectives. This could include convening roundtable discussions with staff of operating agencies to discuss evaluation and priorities, holding regular (e.g., quarterly) community-of-practice meetings, or meeting separately with individual agency stakeholders to identify one or two possible studies of interest.

External stakeholders also should have input into learning agendas. Agencies can cull the inquiries received from Congress or the executive branch to help prioritize useful studies that could answer policy-relevant questions. Agencies can also engage nongovernmental representatives from associations, academia and other research organizations, 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. Generally, agencies can better handle this external engagement when their learning agendas have longer time horizons (e.g. five years versus one year). For more on the role of stakeholder engagement in developing learning agendas, see the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative’s learning agendas implementation playbook (Schupmann et al. 2018).

Second, agencies sometimes complement this process by undertaking their own analysis of the evidence, both of evidence gaps and areas where there is already a strong body of evidence. This analysis may include an original literature review or may actually be an extension of stage 4 of the evidence process, Use Evidence, in which agencies use emerging findings from their own studies to shape not only policy and programs but also the learning agenda process itself.

Third, agencies bring both the input from multiple parties and the review of the evidence to bear in conversations with decisionmakers. Agencies ultimately must decide which topics to prioritize and fund. The prioritization process often includes focusing on utilization—that is, which questions, if answered, will lead to specific actions or inform specific decisions. This process requires engaging decisionmakers directly and navigating federal appropriations processes to finalize learning agendas. Many agencies also need to post summary evaluation plans or “forecasts” of possible studies on agency websites, in the Federal Register, or as notices to Congress, as statute may require.

Note that establishing a learning agenda is different from strategic planning, which dovetails with stage 4 of the evidence process, or evaluation planning, which takes place in stage 2, described next.

**Design and Implement Evidence Activities**

Once priorities are identified and included in a learning agenda, the next step is to design the evidence activities—within the allocated budget—to best address these priorities.

Evidence activities fall into three categories: (1) research-based activities, (2) practice-based activities, and (3) policy- or operational-focused activities. Research-based activities are the most common and are wide ranging: background statistical analysis, analysis to inform or refine performance measures, literature review and content analysis, field-based implementation or case studies, and rigorous experimental impact evaluations. Practice-based activities usually encompass ways of processing learning and knowledge through
networks and gatherings of experts. Policy- and operational-focused activities look to improve internal processes and procedures.

When ethically appropriate and within the scope of agency capacity, some projects in the learning agenda could be carried out directly by federal staff with statistical or analytical skills (e.g., exploratory studies, analysis of performance data trends and patterns, statistical analysis). For evidence activities that are particularly large scale or evaluative in nature, it may be more appropriate or efficient to engage outside, independent researchers to conduct research and evaluation projects.

Internal research requires not only staff to perform the actual research but also senior staff with the technical expertise and program knowledge to successfully oversee its implementation. In the case of external research, agencies must ensure they can translate research priorities and design into funding announcements and scopes of work and that they can oversee a successful procurement process. In addition, as with internal research, external research requires staff in place to oversee all aspects of contractors’ or grantees’ work, to ensure its quality and coordinate its execution with other agency activities.

**Disseminate Evidence**

Disseminating the results of research and evaluation projects is an essential component of quality evidence-building policies and practices. Transparent and timely release of evaluation and research reports is critical to ensuring the usefulness of the reports and reinforces their credibility and independence. This part of the process includes sharing findings with internal and external audiences.

**Internal dissemination.** To better support decisionmaking, agencies may compile synopses of recently completed research that describe the research questions, design, standard of evidence, results, and possible implications for agency policies and programs. Agency staff also may brief internal stakeholders and decisionmakers in person. These presentations may be part of regularly scheduled management or coordination meetings.

**External dissemination.** The basic dissemination approach is to publish reports from—or agency summaries of—completed studies. Reports must undergo rigorous review and quality control and be edited and prepared appropriately for online publication. Nearly every federal agency publishes its final research reports online. Including a short abstract and searchable keywords makes the information more accessible. When appropriate, some agencies also may make the data from completed studies available for public use.

Additionally, some agencies publish regular (monthly or quarterly) research newsletters that list recently completed reports; others issue electronic communications, such as email listervs 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 those by others in the field, regardless of funding source. Some of the more advanced clearinghouses include structured evidence reviews and ratings that indicate the quality of each study’s methodology, including whether studies meet certain standards and
have findings with positive causal impact. Other clearinghouses are more oriented toward practitioners, to share research results and present the information in a way that administrators and staff can learn from or use for their own programs.5

**Use Evidence**

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 typically take several steps to start using the data they collect from performance management and evaluation.

To comply with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), all federal agencies hold quarterly review meetings to discuss data on quarterly and annual performance goals. Many 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, the quarterly GPRA reviews could 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.

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), agencies may introduce this knowledge into meetings around annual budget requests for existing programs. 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 requests to specific data and evidence. Requests for appropriations to support research or new programs can be structured similarly.

In addition, some of the most meaningful use of evidence can occur at the program level with the same constituents who helped develop the learning agenda in the first phase. Lessons emerging from completed evidence activities can help program staff make important decisions about implementation independent of the GPRA and budget processes.

**Key Competencies Required to Support the Evidence Process**

Federal agencies need people with a variety of competencies to support the evidence process and all related activities. To provide a general idea of which competencies are most needed, we matched the activities in each stage of the evidence process to the competencies outlined in several different resources. We were able to find most of the well-aligned competencies in OPM’s 2013 Multipurpose Occupational Systems Analysis Inventory—Close-Ended6 and the National Institutes of Health’s Competencies Dictionary.7 In general, specific research and communications competencies are less specified in these two sources. For this reason, we
explored other sources and found several of the missing competencies in publications by the Qualitative Research Consultant Association and in competency models for specific federal agencies like the National Archives and Records Administration.

Note that these competencies are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. The federal government is undergoing a major revision of its competency models that all agencies should consult when thinking through their actual job descriptions.

The competencies fall into six major groups: leadership, engagement, research, management, publication and communications, and training and coaching. Many of these competencies are cross-cutting, in that they are required in multiple stages of the evidence process, while some are fairly specific to a particular stage (table 1). We describe each of these groups below.

**Leadership.** In the stages of the evidence process that require agency-wide or cross-agency coordination, agencies often need designated staff with core leadership competencies to achieve buy-in for both the learning agenda and the use of evidence in making decisions about policy and programs. This requires high competency in organizational awareness and strategic thinking, influencing and negotiating, creative thinking, results orientation, and change management. Agency staff involved in making decisions about the learning agenda, or helping interpret evidence and translate it to its practical applications in the last stage of the process, also need in-depth knowledge of agency programs. This includes everything from target populations and on-the-ground implementation to performance on GPRA measures and existing evidence.

**Engagement.** To successfully establish a learning agenda, agencies must have staff with basic engagement competencies: the skills to identify and perform outreach to stakeholders, facilitate conversations effectively, and manage a multistep process. These same competencies also help agency staff engage effectively with stakeholders in the dissemination stage as well as with agency leaders at the end of the process to ensure that reports are transparent, clear, and program relevant and that the evidence is used to inform decisionmaking.
### Activities in Each Stage of the Evidence Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Establish a Learning Agenda</th>
<th>Design and Implement Evidence Activities</th>
<th>Disseminate Evidence</th>
<th>Use Evidence</th>
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<td>Process Management</td>
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<td>Conceptualization and Design</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Technical Competence</td>
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</table>

**Note:** NARA = National Archives and Records Administration; NIH = National Institutes of Health Competencies Dictionary; OPM = Office of Personnel Management; QRCA = Qualitative Research Consultant Association.
Research. Agencies must have staff with strong research competencies who can oversee or directly design and implement evidence activities that will help build a strong knowledge base for programs and policies. A basic level of this competency is typically obtained in graduate programs for public policy, public administration, economics, sociology, or related disciplines. Experience in rigorous research and evaluation design and implementation typical of senior staff or methodologists is often needed, along with mid- and entry-level research competencies in qualitative and quantitative data management and analyses, and how to apply and interpret standards of evidence. Program knowledge is also critical in the design and implementation of evidence activities, particularly for approaches to data collection. Additionally, stakeholders involved in other stages of the evidence process must have basic knowledge of research and evidence standards to use evidence, plan learning agendas, and disseminate results.

Management. Management competencies are required to oversee all stages of the evidence process, but particularly those for which agencies choose to contract studies and other core tasks to third-party contractors—from organizing expert panels in the learning agenda stage and conducting primary evaluation and research, to hosting content for dissemination. Successfully shepherding the evidence process through all of its stages requires in-depth knowledge and understanding of federal government policies and rules. At the learning agenda stage, evaluation staff and personnel in other agency offices must understand how to coordinate or dovetail with other parallel processes, including budgeting or appropriations and performance management. When implementing evidence activities, agency staff also must thoroughly understand research procurement processes, if applicable, and OMB processes and policies. During the dissemination stage, agency staff must understand the rules and regulations governing the release of data and reports, both those particular to the agency and more general OMB guidelines. And in stage 4, Use Evidence, agency staff ideally must understand GPRA processes well enough to coordinate effectively.

Publication and communications. Agencies may need a number of strong communications competencies, particularly in the context of drafting learning agendas and disseminating evidence. These competencies include those strongly associated with producing written documents, such as technical writing skills, editing, and copywriting; developing multiple kinds of products (e.g., technical report, executive summary, policy or program briefs, fact sheets, abstracts) from a single evaluation to translate findings for various audiences; managing online content; and strategic communications, messaging, and public relations.

Training and coaching. Many agencies may also need staff with core competencies around training and technical assistance, particularly where baseline evidence capacity is fairly low in terms of research competencies. Staff in program offices (including those in field operations) may have little evaluation or research background, and evaluation staff may need to provide basic training to build awareness and understanding of general concepts to apply throughout the evidence process. Staff who are skilled in training may have experience with staff development along with developing learning tools and templates to support other agency staff throughout the evidence process.
Models for Staffing the Evidence Process

Federal agencies vary significantly in their internal procedures for collecting, monitoring, and reporting data; developing and tracking performance metrics; and designing and executing program evaluations. Some agencies have designated evaluation offices to support the evidence process. Not all federal agencies may be able to set up separate entities like these. However, a closer look at the roles of these offices may help agencies think through different approaches to staffing evidence functions within different contexts.

To explore different staffing strategies, we analyzed the supporting documentation from Results for America’s Federal Invest in What Works Index from 2017, which rated eight federal agencies’ efforts to build the infrastructure needed to use data, evidence, and evaluation in budget, policy, and management decisions. The documentation details a wide variety of topics used to construct the index, including agency structure and leadership, evaluation and research policies and practices, performance management, and use of evidence.

Using this information, we roughly classified the primary roles of the evaluation offices within the eight agencies for all four steps of the evidence process. For the first three steps, we distinguished cases where the evaluation offices played a lead role from those where it primarily provided oversight and support to program offices or other offices within the agency. For the step 4, Use Evidence, we contrasted cases where the evaluation office plays a peer-to-peer role in decisionmaking with those where it supports decisionmaking chiefly occurring at another level. Last, to provide context, we extracted information about the evaluation budget and number of relevant staff.

The eight agencies vary widely in terms of their number of staff and annual budget, from around $4 million and 9 staff members at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to $605 million and 180 staff members at the US Department of Education (table 2).

Evaluation offices of all sizes also play very different roles in the evidence process depending on their context. Five of the eight hold strong, centralized leadership roles throughout the process, leading the learning agenda process, implementing research, taking responsibility for dissemination, and assuming important peer roles in the decisionmaking process with agency leaders to ensure evidence is properly interpreted and used.

Evaluation office roles in the evidence process are much more decentralized in the other three agencies; as a result, program offices take the lead and the evaluation offices play much more of an oversight and advisory role in the first two stages of the evidence process. And while evaluation offices still tend to take the lead in disseminating results, the offices assume more of a support role when it comes to using evidence in agency decisionmaking.
### Table 2

**Overview of Models for Evidence Functions in Federal Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal department or agency</th>
<th>Evaluation office</th>
<th>Budget (millions)</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Establish a Learning Agenda</th>
<th>Design and Implement Evidence Activities</th>
<th>Disseminate Evidence</th>
<th>Use Evidence</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACF</td>
<td>Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation</td>
<td>$165</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Peer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNCS</td>
<td>Office of Research and Evaluation</td>
<td>$4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCC</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation Division</td>
<td>$21.2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Oversight and support</td>
<td>Oversight and support; Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMHSA</td>
<td>Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Oversight and support</td>
<td>Oversight and support; Lead</td>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Oversight and support</td>
<td>Oversight and support</td>
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<td>Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>USDOL</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Peer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Coding of agency policies and structures as described in Results for America, Federal Invest in What Works 2017, https://2017.results4america.org/.

**Note:** ACF = Administration for Children & Families; CNCS = Corporation for National and Community Service; MCC = Millennium Challenge Corporation; NA = not applicable; SAMHSA = Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; USAID = US Agency for International Development; USED = US Department of Education; USHUD = US Department of Housing and Urban Development; USDOL = US Department of Labor.
Establish a Learning Agenda

When designated offices take the lead in establishing a learning agenda, they drive the process, engaging both internal and external stakeholders and ultimately making strategic decisions about what is included and what is not, usually in consultation with program and agency officials. Offices may choose to handle engagement with their own staff or to either outsource it to contracted partners or empower or coordinate with their agencies’ program offices. For example, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) convenes an expert work group biannually and publishes its plan in the Federal Register to request public comments.

In other agencies, the evaluation office supports the development of learning agendas, which occurs at the program level. For example, the US Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research (LER) provides guidance, tools, and technical assistance to USAID staff and partners to help USAID offices develop their own learning agendas. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ) has developed agency-wide learning agenda templates that individual program offices use in their processes. The Millennium Challenge Corporation’s (MCC’s) Monitoring and Evaluation Division, which falls within the Department of Policy and Evaluation, provides oversight to ensure that all programs (“compacts”) develop and follow comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plans. LER also has completed a learning agenda landscape analysis to synthesize lessons learned about the process across USAID and in five other federal agencies (USAID 2017).

The key competencies needed to support this first phase of the process depend on entities’ roles. When evaluation offices are playing more of the lead role, they need greater capacity for leadership, engagement, research, and communications competencies. They also need substantial knowledge of federal policies and processes, as well as a relatively high degree of program knowledge. OPRE is a good example of this. The office has not only general staff, but staff in four different OPRE divisions—Economic Independence, Child and Family Development, Family Strengthening, and Data and Improvement—which allows relevant staff to specialize in particular substantive and methodological areas.

When program offices actively lead learning agenda development, they need the same sets of skills and competencies just described. To support their work, evaluation offices primarily need training competencies and deep research knowledge to think through relevant design options and assess the kinds of studies that might be appropriate, given the level of existing evidence. If necessary, agencies without formal evaluation offices could potentially identify and designate particular program staff, or staff in statistical analysis, economics, or performance management units, to play this support role.

Design and Implement Evidence Activities

As with establishing a learning agenda, the role of the evaluation office may vary when it comes to actually designing and implementing the research that will generate evidence. Most of the agencies that we examined take a lead role in this process. This means that they design studies and analysis, and either do much of the work in house or contract it out to third-party partners. Some of these same agencies (e.g., OPRE, USDOL,
CNCS) also serve in a secondary support role to program offices that oversee their own research, providing either expert consultations on methods and research design for particular studies or training to program staff.

The CBHSQ is unique in that it primarily serves in an oversight and technical assistance role to program offices during this stage of the evidence process but also simultaneously manages several long-standing, large data collection and analysis efforts of its own. These include the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (population data), the Treatment Episode Data Set—Admissions (client-level data), the National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services (substance abuse facilities data), the Drug Abuse Warning Network (emergency department data), and the National Mental Health Services Survey.

By contrast, the evaluation offices of MCC and USAID—though they sometimes engage in direct research activities—primarily provide oversight and support during design and implementation. MCC compacts are all required to have standardized monitoring and evaluation plans that lay out their methodology, performance measures, data collection, and reporting plans to track progress on a quarterly basis. The Monitoring and Evaluation Division mostly focuses on ensuring compliance with established standards and providing support and expertise as needed. USAID’s Office of Learning, Evaluation, and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning provides similar support through guidance, tools, technical assistance to USAID staff and partners, and classroom training programs. LER also manages the Monitoring and Evaluation Services Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity contract, which helps USAID missions more easily contract independent evaluation teams and brings together cross-agency working groups to connect stakeholders in the evidence process throughout the agency.

Evaluation offices that take a lead role in implementing evidence activities primarily need research and management competencies to execute and oversee research and evaluation. They also need a full understanding of federal policies that impact how research is designed and implemented (e.g., Paperwork Reduction Act, Privacy Act), strong knowledge of research methods and principles, and a clear understanding of programs and networks of grantees.

The number of staff needed, as well as the mix of skills and depth of knowledge, will depend on the number and nature of the research projects to be conducted. For example, when most research is contracted out to third-party consultants, offices need staff with strong contract management competencies and a working knowledge of research methods. In contrast, when a significant share of research is designed and implemented in house, offices may need stronger research competencies and deeper research knowledge but less management competency.

When program offices take on the primary responsibility of overseeing research during this second stage of the research process, they need a similar set of competencies and knowledge. The evaluation offices that support them chiefly need training competencies and deep research knowledge. When agencies do not have evaluation offices, they may fill this support role with designated staff within program offices or in offices that specialize in statistics, performance management, or economic analysis. Agencies could potentially identify a pool of staff across the agency to serve as internal consultants as needed.
Disseminate Evidence

Dissemination is the phase of the evidence process where evaluation offices play the most consistent role. All eight of the agencies take the lead in dissemination, regardless of their roles in the first two phases. That said, the competencies needed for this phase depend on several factors. The parties responsible for performing the research or evaluation are also typically the ones producing the reports. This generally requires basic communication competencies such as copyediting, layout, and some degree of graphic design. Evaluation offices, program offices, or external third-party research organizations often need these competencies in house if they produce research themselves. In some cases, agencies provide training and technical assistance to help their partners standardize and quality-control their reports. USAID’s LER office provides guidelines and practical advice to USAID staff and partners on how to write and produce their reports.

All of the agencies post their final evaluation reports online at a minimum. This requires expertise in online publishing at its most basic (e.g., USDOL’s listing of ongoing and completed studies and reports on its website) and content management for more sophisticated searchable platforms like MCC’s Evaluation Catalog, USAID’s Development Experience Clearinghouse, the Department of Education’s Education Resources Information Clearinghouse, CNCS’s Evidence Exchange, and USDOL’s Publication Database Search. Some of the agencies also make deidentified public-use data files available as well. This requires additional knowledge of federal policies around the release of data and personally identifiable information.

Some agencies use an evidence clearinghouse model that takes dissemination past simple publication of reports to systematic classification of research and storage of this information online for use by policymakers and practitioners. This requires strong research knowledge and enhanced communications competencies around content management. In practice, some agencies (e.g., the Departments of Labor and Education and OPRE) outsource many clearinghouse tasks to third-party contractors to develop and maintain the internet-based platform.

Additionally, some evaluation offices produce supplemental dissemination products about research and evaluation tailored to different audiences. Examples include MCC’s evaluation newsletter, Statistically Speaking; CBHSQ’s specialized reports on a range of mental health and substance use issues relevant to government officials and policymakers at the state, federal, and community levels; the Institute of Education Sciences’ Newsflash and social media campaigns; and USDOL’s evaluation Snapshots. These require communication competencies like technical writing, data visualization, and strategic communications.

Last, several agencies use in-person meetings and professional research conferences to disseminate findings, like CNCS’s Office of Research and Evaluation, which organizes cross-sector meetings to share emerging findings; OPRE’s National Research Conference on Early Childhood; and “colleges” held by MCC Monitoring and Evaluation Division with counterparts in partner countries to share best practices and strengthen monitoring and evaluation capacity. Agency staff and contract evaluators also regularly present findings at professional research conferences such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management or the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness. These kinds of dissemination activities require oral communication competencies such as presentation skills as well as significant research and management skills.
Use Evidence

Evaluation offices generally play important roles in helping agencies use evidence from research and evaluation. This is often facilitated through the role of office leadership, which serves on agency leadership bodies charged with making budgeting and other programmatic decisions. In some cases, one or more staff members at this evaluation office are the point people for bringing data and evidence to help inform agency decisions, as is the case with the Chief Evaluation Office of the US Department of Labor, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Office of Policy Development & Research, or the director of the Office of Research and Evaluation at CNCS. In other cases, the evaluation office lead serves as a member of a larger body tasked with weighing data and evidence to make informed decisions, like, the Department of Education’s Evidence Planning Group, which includes other senior staff from the department’s Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, including the Budget Service and the Office of Innovation and Improvement. In other cases, program-level offices have these types of responsibilities. For example, USAID’s technical bureaus synthesize evaluations and provide guidance based on evidence of “what works” by sector that applies to all relevant agency programs.

Fulfilling this kind of role requires strong competence in research along with leadership competencies and program knowledge (e.g., program statutory requirements or particular performance standards) to inform the policy and budgeting processes. In cases where decisionmaking is decentralized, there is an important role for evaluation offices—or other personnel with research knowledge and training competencies—to help program-level decisionmakers interpret research and use evidence effectively.

In addition to meeting with agency leaders, evaluation offices (i.e., the US Department of Labor’s Chief Evaluation Office, US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Office of Policy Research & Development, MCC’s Monitoring and Evaluation Division, or CBHSQ) also actively consult with program office staff and leadership to share research findings and help them interpret what they mean for their own programs. This requires strong engagement competencies and program and research knowledge.

Conclusion

Not all federal agencies can or should have the same model for supporting evidence culture and capacity. Each has vastly different resources, programs, and staff. However, all agencies can find models that work for them and help them set up the processes and infrastructure needed to understand their programs and policies better, continuously improve them, and fulfill their agencies’ missions.

Notes

1. For more details, see page 118 and onward of Executive Office of the President (2018).
2. See the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative’s toolkit for understanding the role of chief evaluation officers (Schupmann and Fudge 2018).


5. See the Employment and Training Administration’s new Workforce System Strategies online resource as an example: https://strategies.workforcegps.org.


7. See https://hr.nih.gov/working-nih/competencies/competencies-dictionary for the online tool.

8. Applying evidence standards to studies allows consumers to better interpret the findings. Rigorous designs like randomized controlled trials and, in some cases, well-designed quasi-experimental methods meet high evidence standards. Particularly when pooled with other studies, they can provide a strong evidence base for policy and program decisions. Studies that have weaker designs may provide important insights, but they meet lower evidence standards and cannot be used confidently to select evidence-based practices.


10. USAID guidance can be found at https://usaidlearninglab.org/, and as curated toolkits at https://usaidlearninglab.org/mel-toolkits.
References


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