



Highlights of [GAO-04-550T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Environment, Technology, and Standards, Committee on Science, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART) is meant to provide a consistent approach to evaluating federal programs during budget formulation. The subcommittee asked GAO to discuss its overall findings and recommendations concerning PART, based on a recent report, *Performance Budgeting: Observations on the Use of OMB's Program Assessment Rating Tool for the Fiscal Year 2004 Budget* (GAO-04-174).

What GAO Recommends

In the recent report on PART, GAO recommended that the Director of OMB (1) address the capacity demands of PART, (2) strengthen PART guidance, (3) address evaluation information scope and availability issues, (4) focus program selection on critical operations and crosscutting comparisons, (5) expand the dialogue with Congress, and (6) articulate and implement a complementary relationship between PART and GPRA.

OMB generally agreed with GAO's findings, conclusions, and recommendations and said it is already taking actions to address many of the recommendations.

GAO also suggested that Congress consider the need for a structured approach to articulating its perspective and oversight agenda on performance goals and priorities for key programs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-550T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Paul L. Posner at (202) 512-9573 or posnerp@gao.gov.

PERFORMANCE BUDGETING

OMB's Program Assessment Rating Tool Presents Opportunities and Challenges for Evaluating Program Performance

What GAO Found

PART helped structure OMB's use of performance information for internal program and budget analysis and stimulated agency interest in budget and performance integration. Moreover, it illustrated the potential to build on GPRA's foundation to more actively promote the use of performance information in budget decisions. OMB deserves credit for inviting scrutiny of its federal program performance reviews and sharing them on its Web site.

The goal of PART is to evaluate programs systematically, consistently, and transparently. OMB went to great lengths to encourage consistent application of PART in the evaluation of government programs, including pilot testing the instrument, issuing detailed guidance, and conducting consistency reviews. Although there is undoubtedly room for continued improvement, any tool is inherently limited in providing a single performance answer or judgment on complex federal programs with multiple goals.

Performance measurement challenges in evaluating complex federal programs make it difficult to meaningfully interpret a single bottom-line rating. The individual section ratings for each PART review provided a better understanding of areas needing improvement than the overall rating alone. Moreover, any tool that is sophisticated enough to take into account the complexity of the U.S. government will always require some interpretation and judgment. Therefore it is not surprising that OMB staff were not fully consistent in interpreting complex questions about agency goals and results.

The lack of program performance information at the agency level also creates challenges in effectively measuring program performance. PART provides an opportunity to consider strategically targeting the assessments on groups of related programs contributing to common outcomes to more efficiently use scarce analytic resources and focus decision makers' attention on the most pressing performance issues cutting across individual programs and agencies.

The relationship between PART and the broader GPRA strategic planning process is still evolving and highlights the critical importance of defining the unit of analysis for program evaluation. Although PART can stimulate discussion on program-specific performance measurement issues, it is not a substitute for GPRA's strategic, longer-term focus on thematic goals, and department- and governmentwide crosscutting comparisons.

PART clearly serves OMB's needs, but questions remain about whether it serves the various needs of other key stakeholders. If PART results are to be considered in the congressional debate, it will be important for OMB to (1) involve congressional stakeholders early in providing input on the focus of the assessments; (2) clarify any significant limitations in the assessments and underlying performance information; and (3) initiate discussions with key congressional committees about how they can best leverage PART information in congressional authorization, appropriations, and oversight processes.